A GIRL AGAINST ODDS

BY
ERNEST
PROTHEROE

2/- NET.

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'THE BEAST WAS CLAWING FURIOUSLY.'

G. A. O.

[see p. 306

A GIRL AGAINST ODDS

OR

THE FARLEIGH FAMILY

BY

ERNEST PROTHEROE

Author of 'The Redemption of the Duffer,' 'The Sister Crusoes,' &c., &c.

London

THE EPWORTH PRESS

J. Alfred Sharp

Printed in 1927.

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
RUSH & WARWICK, BEDFORD.

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CHAPTER I

AN EARLY-MORNING DRAMA

IT was Monday morning early in December. Darkness had not yet commenced to flutter her sable wings; and even if she had, a thick, clammy mist enwrapped the district, completely blotting out all its chief characteristics. Hargreaves Street was as silent as the grave until a clock high up in a neighbouring church tower chimed the quarters, followed by five solemn strokes. It was the signal for the street, nay for practically the whole of Spindleton to spring into life, once more to meet the incessant demands of Giant Cotton, for whose wares the markets of the world unceasingly call.

Along Textile Row ran the muffled-up figure of a man, who, with a short knobbed stick, dealt resounding staccato blows upon nearly every door in the row.

'Five o'clock!' called the knocker-up. 'Git oop!'

Almost ere the words were out of his mouth he was thundering on the next door, and then he would

step back to the last one which he had knocked, to learn whether his warning had proved effective.

'Reet y'are, Tummy,' was the average, half-dazed, sleepy intimation that the slaves of Giant Cotton were now regretfully shaken out of their land of dreams, unwillingly alive to the fact that in just less than sixty short minutes the whirling frames and clattering looms would commence their remorseless demands upon the physical fibre of those who wait upon their steam-driven needs.

Tommy Nobbler's assault upon the drab-coloured door of number sixteen elicited an answer in marked contrast to the usual acknowledgement.

'Thank you, Mr. Nobbler, we're awake!'

For just a moment the old man paused in his restless energy.

'Aw's a bitter cow'd morn,' he said, as he peered up through the mist at the bedroom window from which had proceeded the unusually refined tones—in fact almost startling was the absence of the Lancashire dialect. 'Wrap tha throat oop weel, lass, else tha'll be laid oop agen.'

'Thank you. I'll take care, Mr. Nobbler,' came the reply. The window was closed, and the next instant Tommy was battering two doors almost simultaneously to atone for the infinitesimal delay.

'Good gel, Mary Farleigh,' said Tommy to himself as he stood a moment impatiently awaiting an answer to his last summons. 'Her's as good as gowd.'

At that moment the girl who thus possessed his good opinion was stepping out of her bedroom to rap the opposite door on the landing at the top of the narrow little stairs.

'Charlie! Tom! Five o'clock! Do you hear? Five o'clock. It's——'

She was suddenly interrupted by a voice from the foot of the stairs.

'Why don't you come down to breakfast instead of chattering to yourself up there? It's after five o'clock,' mimicked the laughing tones.

'Oh! you wretch,' she answered with a happy laugh. 'It's so good of you. Is Tom down, too?'

'Yes, he is. We'd save old Tommy's sixpence a week if it weren't for you and Belle. Make haste down and get a good warm before you go out.'

Five minutes later Mary Farleigh was in the little back scullery washing herself in a big enamelled bowl; then, taking the stairs two steps at a time, was back in her room. By the light of a candle she combed out her long brown hair, twisting it into neat plaits very unlike the careless coiffures of most mill-girls, except on Saturday nights and Sundays, when they laid themselves out to attain an effect more in keeping with their temporary freedom from the struggle for daily bread.

When Mary again descended the stairs she entered the little sitting-room and kitchen in one, where her two brothers were already seated awaiting her

appearance. The breakfast and its appointments were severe in their simplicity. Four plates of steaming porridge and four cups of tea and a large plate of thick bread-and-butter in the centre were the main features of the homely meal.

With a pleasant nod the girl took her seat, and while she sprinkled her oats with sugar, thoughtfully and affectionately bent her eyes upon her brothers.

Charlie Farleigh was just eighteen, and, unlike most cotton operatives, he looked younger than his years. He was dark almost to swarthiness, his black hair clustering in little curls over an intellectual forehead. His eyes twinkled with good humour, and his whole bearing was expressive of a happy disposition. His brother, two years his junior, was a sharp contrast in his Saxon fairness. He was sturdy and well knit, and there was a look in the clear blue eyes that appeared to denote a thoughtfulness rather unusual in one of his years. Mary was neither dark nor fair; she was what she laughingly termed a 'drab between'; which was a most unfair description of a personality that needed but a pleasanter environment to merit her placement in a class of most attractive femininity. She was but a sixteen-year-old dressmaking apprentice when her widowed mother died; and forthwith Mary became a woman, the head of a household, to keep which going made heavy demands upon health and strength, and every good quality of mind and temperament with which

she was endowed. Charlie was then only fourteen ; Tom was twelve ; and Belle, the baby of the family, was but a ten-year-old little schoolgirl.

Tom commenced a healthy spirited attack upon his porridge, only to spring up from his chair to step to the foot of the stairs. But Mary with uplifted finger arrested his purpose.

'Don't disturb Belle,' she said. 'She went to bed with a splitting headache, and I want her to rest until the last minute. She'll break down if she isn't careful.'

The boy nodded his head in understanding, as he resumed his seat.

Breakfast was no meal for laggards. It was almost astonishing with what alacrity the three Farleighs took their food. Time was precious ; only a very few minutes remained that they could call their own. Already the steam syrens of the factories were making the morning hideous with their hoarse warnings.

It was the signal for the three operatives to leap from their chairs to prepare a further meagre breakfast, which would be snatched during the half-hour break in their work at half-past eight. Each doubled up a slab of bread-and-butter, which was hastily wrapped in a piece of newspaper and transferred to a pocket ; and a couple of spoonfuls of sugar and a pinch of tea were dropped into smoke-blackened cans.

The bulls, now a continuous roar, were reinforced by shrill steam whistles; and outside in the street could be heard the slamming of doors and the clatter of many iron-tipped clogs upon the narrow pavement.

Mary darted upstairs, and, leaning over the bed, gently shook her sister.

'Belle! Belle! We're going. Good morning, dear!'

The girl sprang up.

'Oh, Mary!' she cried. 'It's too bad of you not to have called me.'

'Never mind,' was the reply. 'The boys were up first and they got the breakfast ready. You are not to get up until eight o'clock.'

She stooped over the younger girl, pushing her down into the clothes and again drawing them over her. She laid her lips to Belle's cheek, and a minute later she was below, pinning on her head a red tam-o'-shanter, while her brothers adjured her to make haste lest she wished for them to 'lose a quarter.' Throwing a woollen shawl round her shoulders, Mary stepped out of doors, giving an involuntary shiver as the mist enveloped her.

At the end of the little street the Farleighs entered a more important thoroughfare. It was impossible to see, but for all that they pressed forward without hesitation, and their hastening steps were absorbed in the stream of clattering clogs on countless feet that were scurrying chiefly in the same direction.

There were men and women and boys and girls. Nothing is sadder in the whole of our national life than that thousands of our children, while yet too young to leave school, are considered old enough to work for the cotton Juggernaut. For a few shillings a week it is allowed to sap childhood of all that makes life worth living, to warp and dwarf the promising young frames, to dull the intellect, to consign its tender victims to slavery almost as bad as that from which we freed the black man generations ago.

One steam hooter, more blatant if possible than the rest, suddenly varied its discordant howl. A stranger would have failed to notice the change of note; but the white slaves of Industry, and especially the boy and girl halftimers, knew the meaning of the variation. More than one church clock was commencing to chime the quarters; the ringing footsteps changed into an amble; they developed into a run. The Farleighs were lost in the stream of humanity that was sweeping in at the open gates of John Glynn and Sons' Alabama Mill.

Just under the arched gateway stood a heavy-jowled overseer, watch in hand, with a scowl upon his coarse red features for the tail end of the procession, that for some minutes had been entering the mill portals. The clock in the yard was striking six, and the hissing boilers told that full steam was impatiently waiting to twist and weave the downy

fibres better than they can be done anywhere else in the whole wide world.

At that moment the operatives were taking no pride in Lancashire's superiority; their energies were bent to handing in their metal checks for the timekeeper to register their entrance. A little girl, who ought to have been dreaming in fairyland, made a desperate spurt to pass the modern Simon Legree ere the sixth stroke of the clock fell. Her trembling limbs faltered; the tip of her clog caught against a projecting cobble-stone, and she fell at full length, dropping her uncovered bread-and-butter and scattering her mixture of sugar and tea over the muddy stones.

From the tip of the overseer's tongue dropped a curse at the child's clumsiness. Scrambling to her knees, she endeavoured to scrape together at least some of the dirty fragments of the prospective meal, while the official gave vent to still more bad language.

'For shame Mr. Bilter! Surely the child deserves sympathy not curses.'

The reproof came from Mary Farleigh, as she extended a hand to raise the child to her feet.

'Never mind it, dear,' said she. 'It's quite spoilt now. Come to me at breakfast time and you can share in mine.'

But John Bilter, gulping down his astonishment, now found his tongue in a burst of sizzling-hot bad language. In this direction his vocabulary was

acknowledged to be unique ; his grasp of profanity scarcely called upon him to repeat himself ; and he amply justified his unenviable reputation.

It was unfortunate for the overseer that Charlie Farleigh was just one minute in the rear of Mary ; a broken shoelace had delayed him while only fifty yards from the gate. He came sprinting in—easier for him to do than in many cases, for neither of the Farleighs wore clogs—just in time to catch a blasphemous expression directed at his sister. Bilter opened his mouth to express his feelings at greater length, but a fist was suddenly planted upon his evil lips and he was sent sprawling amid the relics of the little halftimer's ruined breakfast.

'You miserable bully,' cried Charlie, his eyes blazing as he stood over the discomfited overseer. 'You speak to my sister like that and I'll break your neck. You low ruffian, you're not fit to drive pigs. It's a shame girls should have to submit to your foul tongue ; but you'll spare my sister, or I'll know the reason why.'

Mary was infinitely distressed at the contretemps. It was not the first time by many that Bilter's tongue had cut her like a whiplash ; but she had perforce viewed it as only an additional unpleasant feature attached to the winning of one's bread-and-cheese. And now Charlie's quick temper would probably have the effect of robbing them of the cheese, if not of the bread itself.

The last comers, men, women and children, formed a ring round the leading actors in this early-morning drama. The women and children were too frightened to interfere; the men were too cautious to show any active interest in the matter, although it was hard for some of them to hide their gratification at the manner in which the overseer had met with his deserts.

Bilter picked himself up, and, without a word or a glance at anybody, strode out into the street through the big gates, just as they were being closed by the man whose duty it was to bar out further late comers. The operatives hurried off to their work. They were surprised at the overseer's silence, but not for a moment did they believe the matter would end there. Even if the discipline necessary in a large works would permit it, Jack Bilter was not built that way. That he would not meekly submit to his well-deserved punishment was a foregone conclusion.

That same thought weighed heavily on the mind of Mary as she crossed the yard and turned in at the doorway, preparatory to climbing the steps that led up to the fourth floor where her work lay.

Only when the gateway was clear did a young gentleman step out of a little office that opened into it. He was smartly dressed and well groomed, and there was an air in the clear-cut features that betokened him to be 'a man of authority.' He

thoughtfully watched Mary as long as she was in sight.

"Serve the blackguard right,' he muttered. 'If her brother hadn't done it I would willingly have served her myself. But who is she?' he asked himself half dazedly.

Had Mary only heard the words they might have added a little sprightliness to her heavy steps, as she toiled up those apparently interminable factory stairs.

CHAPTER II

AN UNEXPECTED DROP-SCENE

BELLE FARLEIGH awoke. The room was not quite dark, but there was not sufficient light for her to see the time by the little American clock upon the mantelshelf. She lay for a moment thinking how it came about that she was lying there alone; why she had not slipped on an old coat that she might hasten downstairs to light the fire, and put forward the breakfast for her sister and brothers who had to turn out so abominably early. Then she remembered her sister's visit to the room just as she set out for the mill.

Belle stared into the semi-darkness while for a moment she gave herself up to a quiet consideration of the elder girl—mother and sister in one, who would hesitate at no sacrifice to give her the advantages that were denied to so many girls of her class.

Her class? It puzzled her a little just accurately to define to what class she really belonged. Belle at any rate was not yet a slave to Giant Cotton. So

far she had been spared the common sacrifice demanded of Lancashire's girlhood. So far she had escaped the toils of the half-time system, which often inflicts upon mere children the cares of man and womanhood while they still retain the stature of dwarfs. The girl's heart was suffused with gratitude for that sober-minded, self-reliant sister who had smoothed her path. She stepped out of bed to peer at the clock, and then she knelt down to her morning prayers; and of the several simple, childish petitions which it was customary for her to voice, not one was more heartfelt than 'God bless Mary.'

Rising from her knees, the girl struck a match and lighted the candle that was on the little dressing-table. Gathering up her clothes, she hurried out of the apartment to dress before the fire in the room below. Her portion of porridge had been placed upon the hob, but the cup of tea which had been poured out for her had long since been cold. She had only to pour hot water into the teapot for more to be ready for her use.

She donned neither her skirt nor bodice before sitting down to her lonely breakfast, and quite half of the twenty minutes she devoted to the meal was occupied in studying some closely written notes in a penny exercise-book, which she fixed up against the sugar-basin in front of her.

When next she looked at the clock, which she had

brought downstairs with her, it pointed to eight. She sprang up in haste, for she had plenty to do within the next forty-five or fifty minutes. That was all that remained to her before it was time for her to set out for the Loombridge Road Council School, where she was one of the mere handful of girls in Standard VII ; for the half-time fiend dulls and weakens, if it does not wholly bankrupt, the understandings of many of the girls who might otherwise have attained the highest standard.

There was the breakfast table to clear and the crocks to wash ; the fireplace needed cleaning up ; the room had to be swept out and the fire to be replenished and banked up with slack so that it would last until half-past twelve. By the time these duties were compassed very few minutes were left in which to effect a hasty toilet. At ten minutes to nine, however, Belle was standing on the front doorstep with a strapful of books under her arm. She locked the door and passed briskly up the street.

Belle Farleigh possessed even more regular patrician features than her sister. She was a winsome lass, from the boyish cap that crowned her hair, which in a wealth of ruddy gold fell below her shoulders, to the serviceable boots that encased her hurrying feet. There was a smartness about her that was lacking in the usual Spindleton schoolgirl of her age. She was not the weary-eyed, doleful-looking type of scholar that is frequently the problem

and despair of the Lancashire teacher. But then she did not spend a great portion of her waking hours in a vapour-bath atmosphere amid the crash and whirl of spinning and weaving machinery.

There had been quite a revolution in local educational matters, and in nothing so much as concerned the boys and girls who desired to enter the teaching profession. A Pupil Teacher Centre was in course of erection for the attendance of the budding dominies and school-marms, where they would spend at least half the week receiving expert tuition, instead of simply an hour's lessons at the elementary school at eight o'clock in the morning, after which they taught, or pretended to teach, the children who were sometimes almost as old as themselves. This advantage lay within the reach of all young teacher candidates, but there was something better for those who had the energy and the ability to take advantage of a still greater opportunity.

The County Education Committee, which only delegated the control of its own schools to the Spindleton District Council, had recently issued a scheme of scholarships for those who desired to become teachers. There were six for boys and six for girls, ten of them tenable at the Centre, but the top boy and girl were to attend two famous High Schools. Belle Farleigh was one of the two chosen candidates of Loombridge Road School who were working hard to gain this last coveted position.

In view of that dramatic encounter in the gateway of Alabama Mill, only three short hours ago, it was something of a coincidence that the other candidate was the overseer's daughter.

Mrs. Bilter was a blousy, high-coloured matron, and Maud, her living prototype, was consequently only as ordinarily presentable as a muddle of rather ill-assorted features would allow. In temper she took after her father; and the term 'ordinary' could not fairly be applied to her quarrelsome bearing and especially to her vitriolic tongue.

One would need to travel far to find a greater contrast than that presented by the two scholarship candidates—the one, mild and gentle in manner, with a heart overflowing with sympathy for all those worse off than herself; the other, overbearing and aggressive, with an open contempt for those who lived in less style than obtained in John Bilter's stuccoed, jerry-built, eight-roomed villa in a crescent just off the High Street, which was Spindleton's one main thoroughfare.

Maud did not attempt to disguise her displeasure at the fact that a sister of three mill operatives—poorly paid ones, too, as her father could testify—should have any real chance of obtaining one of the scholarships for which the cream of the elementary schools in the county area would compete. Success would assuredly go to those who were able to afford a special course of preparation, over and above the

lessons provided at the Council School. Although Mr. Bilter's reputation for hardfistedness was not altogether undeserved, he was rather grudgingly expending a few pounds in giving his daughter every advantage it was possible to score over any of the poorer competitors.

It was sometimes a sore trial to Belle Farleigh to be compelled to endure Maud Bilter's insolence: the manner in which the overdressed girl quizzed the plain serviceable garments, which Mary made for her, brought smarting tears to her eyes; and often ill-natured remarks made to other girls, but meant to reach Belle's ears, caused her to bite her lips in the repression of a bitter retort.

At school this particular morning nothing happened to ruffle the ordinary routine; and at 12.30 Belle was back at home in the little kitchen hastily preparing the midday meal, to which her sister and brothers would come tearing in a few minutes after one o'clock. In addition to what Mary had taught her of housewifery, Belle had profited by a two years' course of weekly lessons at the Cookery Centre, and consequently to prepare mashed potatoes to be served with the cold remains of the Sunday joint of beef made no great demands upon the girl's knowledge.

The workers came in and took their seats at the table.

'Well, old girl, how's school gone down?' asked Tom.

'All right, thank you,' was the reply.

'Haven't been fighting the top girl for her place, I hope?' he continued. 'Thought perhaps you might have been dusting Maud Bilter down.'

The two seniors tried to look unconcerned at what appeared to be a flagrant breach of their agreement to say nothing of the discomfiture of John Bilter unless it had already come to Belle's ears. An expressive wink from Tom intimated that his question was but thrown out as a 'feeler,' to ascertain whether the overseer's daughter had referred to the matter. But the schoolgirl's answer easily satisfied their desire for information.

'Don't be silly, Tom,' laughed Belle. 'Even if I wished, I could not very well fight one who is miles and miles away. Maud went for the week-end to her aunt's near Manchester, and she returns only late this evening.'

Mary Farleigh heaved a sigh of relief. Though she could neither wonder at, nor really blame, Charlie for his high-spirited defence of her, she could not get rid of the feeling that they would suffer for it. So far as Belle was concerned she was glad the evil was postponed, if only for a day. She would go to almost any length to prevent her sister meeting with any disturbing influence likely to militate against her studies. There was now no immediate need to tell her sister of the early morning episode;

she would wait until they went to bed; and in the meantime she could think how best to prepare the younger girl for a certain taste of Maud Bilter's least desirable qualities.

At school and mill the afternoon passed uneventfully enough, save that at the latter there was considerable speculation as to the outcome of young Farleigh so summarily taking 'Jack Bilter's number down.' The overseer had not shown himself at the mill; it was assumed that he was at home endeavouring to assuage the swelling of a badly cut lip. One or two men attempted to discuss the matter with Charlie, but he preferred not to talk of it. Mary exhibited the same attitude of reserve, but, nevertheless, she could not prevent the expression of opinion by her forewoman that Bilter was a 'dirty tyke' never known to miss an opportunity of 'getting his own back.' The girl could not repress a quake at the possible ultimate result. As they went home she communicated her fears to her brother, but he only breezily reminded her that Alabama Mill was not the only one in Spindleton. His cheeriness, however, possessed little enough on which to found itself, for not a few of the mills were running on short time; and to be thrown out of employment was by no means a pleasant prospect.

As matters turned out, it would have been better had Mary warned Belle, that Maud Bilter would

now consider her dislike for her school rival to be tangibly justified by Charlie Farleigh's attack upon her father.

At seven o'clock that evening Belle set out for the Municipal Technical School to attend a French class; her younger brother accompanied her, for in the same building he attended three evenings a week for instruction in the theory and practice of cotton spinning. These evening classes were well attended, which says a great deal for the grit of Lancashire lads and lasses, many of whom after a long day spent in enervating toil devote most of their remaining hours, not claimed by sleep, to the improvement of their education.

It was after nine o'clock when Belle was descending the stairs on her way to the cloakroom, which opened off the big central hall. As she reached the first landing, the door of the millinery classroom opened, and she was genuinely surprised to come face to face with Maud Bilter.

Although Belle had no reason to like the girl, she never ostentatiously went out of her way to avoid her. When circumstances brought them together, if she saw no reason to be effusive she never failed to be polite. And thus she addressed the millinery student pleasantly enough.

'I never expected to meet you,' she commenced. 'Polly Slater said you were not returning home until late to-night.'

Belle could conceive no reason for the smouldering resentment in Maud's eyes.

'Polly Slater isn't obliged to know all my business,' she snapped; 'and I don't want any of your interference, you low miserable thing, poking your nose where it isn't wanted.'

It was not nearly so much the words as the venomous look which accompanied them, that most astonished Belle, who was too taken aback to voice a word in protest, or for the moment to seek an explanation.

'A nice pupil teacher you'll make with your stuck-up sister and your blackguard brother,' continued Maud. And then in her rising anger, falling into the local dialect, she added: 'Her's nowt but a mill hand, an' nubbut a poor one at that.'

During this tirade the two girls were slowly descending the stairs, at the foot of which Belle would be able to part company with the young virago. At that moment Maud's brother came swinging down the steps in their rear. As he recognized Belle he lurched a little to the right, and, colliding with her, sent the girl crashing upon the wood-blocked floor just within the hall.

At number sixteen, Textile Row, Mary Farleigh half an hour later was asking Charlie to suggest some reasons for the unusual lateness in the return of the younger members of the family. He was just completing some drawings for his machine construction class the following night. He was too

engrossed to give much thought to the matter, only looking up for a moment to announce that in three or four minutes he would go out to meet them.

There was a knock at the door, and then it was opened to show old Tommy Nobbler on the step.

'Come in, Tommy,' cried Charlie. 'What's blown you here at this time of night? I'm glad you didn't play your tattoo on the door or I should have been scared. I might have thought it was time to go to work.'

Mary was looking at the old man with wonderment in her eyes. His visit was a most unusual one, and she divined from his perturbation that its object was almost assuredly equally unpleasant.

'Dun yo' knaw aw dunna want to mek no moan ower it,' commenced Tommy, 'but tha'll better be a getten out to meet Tum an' t' yung lass.'

Mary gave an incoherent little cry.

'What's the matter with them?' cried Charlie, springing to his feet.

'Nawthin'. They beant hurt, thank t' Lord, but——'

His words eased their minds, though his hesitancy caused both Mary and Charlie to attempt to hasten his explanation.

'What Aw means is 'at yo're Tummy has wiped t' floor wi' yung Jimmy Bilter,' said he. 'Awm towd he's bin tekken whoam to his muther on a shetter. Aw on'y knaws whot Awm towd.'

CHAPTER III

A GLOOMY OUTLOOK

WHEN Jimmy Bilter charged down the school stairs upon Belle Farleigh, had he possessed eyes for anybody else or thoughts of anything but taking a petty indirect revenge for his father's downfall, he might have noticed that near the bottom of the steps Tom Farleigh was waiting for his sister. He saw young Bilter's manœuvre, but was too late to warn her or to take any measure to break her fall. He made no mistake, however, in being in time to drop his fist full in Jimmy's face as his own impetus brought him within range of retribution.

By the time Belle had regained her feet she found Tom very fully engaged in staving off the desperate rushes of the young bully. Highly incensed by that first well-directed blow, Bilter was in no need of encouragement from his sister, but nevertheless Maud urged him to give 'the little hound a good thrashing.' From a purely family standpoint the advice was well meant, but Jimmy found that the young mill-hand was in little humour to make

the task an easy or a pleasant one. Tom was the younger by a full year, but in physique he was the equal of his opponent; and he speedily gave evidence that his membership of the Boys' Club, where boxing was not the least of the attractions, would stand him in good stead.

Gradually it dawned upon Bilter junior that history was repeating itself, except that his own defeat was not encompassed by one blow as had been the case with his father. Jimmy's rather closely-set little eyes glowed with hatred, and his mouth had a vicious twist that boded ill for young Farleigh, if only the elder boy could secure the upper hand.

The combatants had worked their way into the centre of the hall, and by the time the fight had been in progress only a couple of minutes quite a score of departing students were on the scene. Some of the girls were anxious to bring to a close what they declared was scandalous behaviour, that was a lasting disgrace to those who took part in it, and no less to those who encouraged it; but the boy students looked upon the matter with a more lenient judgement. To interpose in a fair up and down 'dust-up' might perchance be interfering with the liberty of the subject. One or both of the boys must necessarily have a grievance, and intervention might possibly cause the ends of justice to be defeated. It was astonishing with what unanimity Tom Farleigh was adjudged to be the instrument of

the blind goddess ; and the desire on the part of the majority of the spectators was that justice should be done.

Maud Bilter was filled with ungovernable rage when she discerned, not only that Jimmy was getting 'a fair lickin',' but that its infliction was affording considerable popular satisfaction. She turned on her heel and darted off up the stairs. Her errand was evident two minutes later in the appearance of a couple of assistant masters, who arrived upon the scene just in time to see Tom Farleigh close with Bilter, whom he sent to the floor with a thud that could be heard half across the hall. The defeated young bully, with his face smeared with blood from a cut cheek, looked positively ghastly under the electric light. He lay there still and silent, and for just a moment everybody imagined the incident had developed into a tragedy for which they had not bargained. But even as the dread thought assailed them, Jimmy opened his eyes and then half dazedly raised himself into a sitting posture.

No sooner did the teachers perceive that their fears were groundless than they peremptorily cleared the hall of all the scholars, save only the two principals and their sisters. It needed but the briefest inquiry into the matter to satisfy the masters that in all probability Bilter had only met with his deserts. They reproved Farleigh, but it was so

half-hearted as to be little short of congratulation; they lectured Bilter on his bullying propensities and enjoined better conduct in future. Finally they took precautions that out in the street there should be no renewal of hostilities, although Jimmy's attitude was scarcely suggestive of the possibility of anything of the kind. The two Bilters were allowed to go out by the front door; Belle and Tom were detained for a few minutes, and then they were dismissed by another door which opened into a side street, for which both were thankful, as it enabled them to avoid the crowd of boys and girls who were waiting at the front for their appearance.

Tom was in no mood for conversation, and Belle was in a state but little removed from tears as they hurried off in the direction of home. They had but little further to go when they met Charlie speeding towards them. He had snatched up his cap and darted from the house immediately Tommy Nobbler had made his disconcerting announcement, leaving the old man to alleviate Mary's dry-eyed distress as well as he could.

Belle ran up to her elder brother and slipped her arm within his, as though glad to be assured of more protection than her younger escort could guarantee, notwithstanding he had so recently showed considerable aptitude in that direction.

'What have you been up to?' queried Charlie, who was inspecting Tom in the light afforded by a

neighbouring street lamp. 'Looks as if you've been fighting.'

'Yes, he has,' interposed Belle rather tearfully in recollection. 'Jim Bilter knocked me down, and Tom and he have been fighting like—like——'

'Go on, Belle,' the boy broke in with a grin. 'That's just a girl's gratitude for taking her part.'

His sister's affectionate smile was sufficient reply that she quite recognized and appreciated his services.

'You don't mean to say you allowed young Bilter to paste you like that?' Charlie nodded at the angry-looking red patches which appeared on the cheeks of the younger boy.

Tom made a motion as though to rub off the marks.

'I'm all right,' he said, 'but, Wag, it would do you good to see Jimmy. I didn't half crumple him up—I just knocked stuffin' outen him,' he added, lapsing into the vernacular.

'I daresay you did, you young hooligan,' replied Charlie, with mock severity. 'Perhaps you've knocked us all out of work, too.'

Tom was about to protest that all the blame did not lie at his door. Probably his elder anticipated the retort, which he staved off. 'Come on,' said he. 'Mary will be in fits about you.'

When they reached home Tommy Nobbler had taken his departure, and Mary stood upon the step

anxiously awaiting their appearance. With a cry of relief she drew her sister to her within the room, and there, with one hand resting upon Tom's shoulder, she listened to Belle's account of the origin of the disturbance.

Tom retired to the scullery to bathe his face with warm water. Mary was tearfully regretful that he had taken the law into his own hands; but Charlie openly avowed that he would have disowned his brother had he exhibited an atom less of spirit.

'Jack Bilter deserved the little he got this morning,' averred he warmly, 'and the chip off the old block earned all Tom has given him.'

As he very gingerly dried his face on the rough roller towel, Tom, through the half-open door, heard the avowal, and the words appeared to ease his smarting cheeks.

When Belle and Tom had retired to rest their elders more openly considered the situation, the difficulty of which had certainly not been lessened by the vigorous espousal of the younger girl's cause. Discussion, however, appeared quite futile. Charlie was firmly of opinion that he would have to leave the Alabama; and he had already debated with himself whether he would not sever his connexion with the mill of his own initiative, and thus rob the overseer of the satisfaction of announcing that John Glynn and Sons could dispense with his services.

Mary, on her part, had considered the advis-

ability of appealing to Mr. William Jarrocks, the general manager. Yet even in the same moment she felt that she could not bring herself to do it. She shrank from asking a favour of one whose open, leering admiration had often caused a warm flush to suffuse her cheeks.

Bill Jarrocks was one of the most objectionable types of the self-made man to be found in the county and the calling which breed them by the score. Many of the older operatives could remember the days when he was but a foreman of the Alabama Mill, which was then but a very small concern. A whole series of unexpected events had conspired to raise Jarrocks to a position for which he lacked many desirable qualities.

A long-continued boom in trade caused the mill to be extended again and again, until it was one of the largest in the district. It was a business of which John Glynn had every reason to be proud, and when his two sons were old enough to be taken into partnership there was no happier man in the cotton county. But the elder son was drowned in a yachting accident off Blackpool, and two years later his brother, who had gone out to the West Indies on business for the firm, fell a victim to Yellow Jack. Thus it came about that the foreman, who was not averse to add considerably to his salary by a bookmaking agency, and still more by lending small sums at exorbitant interest to the mill-hands, was raised to

a position that his wildest dreams had never offered to him. From a business point of view, or at least some aspects of it, he was an undoubted success. Under his management the profits showed an ever upward tendency, and for some years the childless, heartbroken old man had allowed Mr. Jarrocks almost sole control of the huge establishment.

Only six months ago John Glynn ceased to take any interest whatever in guiding the destiny of the factory, the building up of which had been the greater part of his life. Struck down by illness, paralysis intervened, and the Alabama Mill passed without the range of whatever weakling thoughts were left to his vagrant sensibility. Mrs. Glynn was an invalid, and consequently the factory was run by the family lawyers, who asked no questions of Mr. William Jarrocks save only as concerning the financial interests of their clients.

The operatives of the Alabama freely cursed the new régime. Gradually their old-time privileges were filched from them—privileges which had been the outcome of John Glynn's interest in the work-people who had served him well. The manager did not believe in pandering to the aspirations of the workers; dividends was his creed, and self-indulgence his god.

There are many men, utter strangers to sentimentality, keen and resolute in business almost to the point of brutality, who in their private capacity

give full play to all the graces that enrich and ennoble family and public life. In business they fight desperately to score a farthing advantage over a rival, in private they view their wealth as but in trust for those less capable or less fortunate than themselves.

William Jarrocks was not of this class. In buying and manufacturing cotton to advantage, and in extracting the last ounce out of the mill-hands at the lowest possible wage the Cotton Spinners' Union would allow, he had nothing to learn. Personally he possessed scarcely a single redeeming quality; he was intemperate, foul of tongue, and brutal in temper; and rumour did not hesitate to say that his wife, only two months dead, had been hurried to her grave by a long course of neglect, if not positive ill-usage. It only need be added that in person he fittingly matched his unenviable reputation; and consequently there was little wonder that a girl possessed of the least refinement, or the slightest respect for her womanhood, should prefer to owe no favour to the manager of the Alabama.

No. A thousand times, no! Mary Farleigh could not ask Jarrocks to intervene between the overseer and her brother.

No matter from what aspect Mary and Charlie reviewed the tangle in which their affairs had suddenly become involved, they were quite assured

that the solution of the difficulty did not lie with them. The decision rested entirely with John Bilter, and they might as well confine their speculations to the attempt of calculating what form his revenge would take—for revenge there would surely be.

Although the girl bravely endeavoured to bid her brother an unconcerned 'good-night,' he knew only too well that there would probably be little sleep for either of them. For years she had fought courageously against the odds. Charlie was the chief breadwinner, and for him to be thrown out of employment would mean——

A half-stifled sob on her way upstairs completed Mary's estimate of the ultimate result.

CHAPTER IV

ONE OF THE UNEMPLOYED

THE next morning the Farleighs approached the Alabama with considerable trepidation, for it was highly probable that Charlie at least would be denied entrance. Mary's slumbers had been very broken, and she wondered whether one dream in particular was now to receive interpretation. She had seen her brothers and herself speeding towards the mill on the stroke of time, Charlie a few yards in advance. Only when too late did they perceive that the gateway was just the magnified face of John Bilter, in which his least prepossessing features stood out in grotesque prominence, especially the thick sneering lips, which failed to hide the tobacco-stained, broken teeth behind them. Charlie's attempted swerve was of no avail—the cavernous mouth of the ogre opened and closed with a snap—and Mary was left to bemoan the fate of her brother, while the demoniacal being smiled in ferocious, derisive glee at her bereavement.

Charlie's entrance, however, was not challenged; the portent of the dream was not to be realized for

the present. John Bilter could be seen within the little office, but his deputy made no remark as the hands hurried past him. It is impossible to exaggerate Mary's thankfulness for the respite ; and yet absolute silence on the subject by those in authority did but mean more drawn-out suspense.

The mill was lighted up from top to bottom, only the separate block of general offices was in darkness. From the hissing boilers in the engine-yard arose clouds of steam which is the very breath of King Cotton ; and almost ere the hands reached their quarters the machinery was set in motion. The scutchers commenced their pounding roar as the beaters, plying 1,400 to the minute, hurled up from below a perfect blizzard of white fluff, shortly to be issued from the back of the machine in the shape of the 'lap', not unlike a huge sheet of wadding, winding round a revolving roller. Passed on to the carding-room the cotton filaments are combed out all in the same direction and the lap becomes a 'sliver,' a long woolly rope that almost a breath would break As the slivers pass out of the carding-engines each enters into a vertical revolving tin cylinder, round and round which it coils itself until it is filled to the top. It was Tom Farleigh's work to convey the cylinders to the next department for their contents to undergo the process of 'drawing.' Half a dozen slivers are combined and drawn out into one sliver of only the proportions of each of the original six.

Mary was a drawer. She held only an inferior post, thanks to the late age at which she had entered the mill; she had first to atone for the missing years before she could figure to greater advantage on the wages list. Her work called for lynx-eyed devotion to the frames. Constantly the breaking of one of the ends, or the emptying of one of the tall canisters, throws the machine out of gear; and not until the six ends are again between the rollers will the wheels revolve again.

The succeeding processes are nothing but a confusing series of doublings and twistings followed by constant further drawing out, until the tender sliver becomes yarn of sufficient thinness and tenacity to be wound upon a bobbin or large wooden reel.

Then comes perhaps the most complicated machinery that mechanical genius ever achieved. To watch mule-spinning is to lose one's mind in the labyrinth of shafts, wheels, pulleys, levers, springs, and other intricate devices. It seems little short of a miracle that the operatives can avoid being involved in the flying wheels, the hundreds of whirling spindles, and the network of winding, twisting threads.

All through the day Charlie Farleigh's mind was seldom free from speculation concerning the time and the measure of John Bilter's assured resentment. At six o'clock the mule came to rest after its tireless advances and retreats, in which it draws and twists

the tightening yarn ; and only then did his foreman tell Farleigh to call at the overseer's office on his way out.

Charlie received the intimation in silence. He only nodded his head. He stood for a moment looking at the now still and silent machinery. Not until that moment did he realize how he loved the almost sentient mechanical devices amid which he spent his days. There was no important section of the ' mule ' that he had not drawn to scale in the evening school, while so many others of his class and age devote their leisure to amusement, and courses to which harsher terms might be applied.

Sentiment played but a small part in the composition of Ned Gorman ; but Farleigh, although only a junior, was one of his most reliable hands, and he would be genuinely sorry to lose him. After delivering the message he strode away, only to take a half turn for a last glance at the one about to get ' th' shove.' He stepped back to his side.

' Aw'm varra sorry, lad,' he commenced. ' Aw wurr afeard o' this. When Bilter's temper's oop he caps t' owd lad hisself ; an' Aw nivver expected he'd abide a reet gud smasher ower t' side at yed.'

Charlie did not reply, but there entered into his eyes a look which caused Gorman to add—

' Aw'd advise tha to tak it quiet loike. Say nowt an' do nowt. Thee'st non o' th' lollupin' soort, an' Aw want tha back inside on a fortnit. Aw'd sooner

onybody fotched me a dab o' t' earhoyle 'an lose sumbry 'at addles his brass soa weel.' Placing his hand on Charlie's shoulder he concluded: 'Leeve it to me, an' yo'st see it'll cum all reet i' th' lung length.'

Farleigh still said no word, but he held out his hand to Gorman; and its pressure, and the gratitude shining in his eyes, were sufficient answer for the older man.

John Bilter stood in front of his office fire with impatience marking every line of his attitude, and which was still more plainly evidenced by the haste with which he unburdened himself as Farleigh crossed the threshold.

'We nivver want to see yore face agen at th' Alabama,' he blurted out truculently. 'Yo're sacked from this minnit. Yo're——'

Farleigh turned smartly on his heel, stepped into the gateway and out into the street, leaving the overseer to address his further remarks to himself. It would have done Charlie good to see how his unexpected action disappointed the bully. He had expected a protest if not an appeal against summary dismissal, and had anticipated not a little enjoyment in giving vent to a few cutting remarks to give the situation an enjoyable piquancy. At that moment the office cat came purring towards him, and he kicked her across the room just by way of showing his resentment at the advantage

which Farleigh had scored over him by his dignified silence.

'Anyhow Aw reckon Aw've settled him,' muttered Bilter. 'An' th' fust excuse Aw'll get rid o' th' little whelp 'at slammed Jimmy las' neet. As for the gel, hoos a pratty un, an' Jarrocks is just daft on pratty gels. If Aw conna sack her, Aw con mek t' Alabama too hot to howd th' owd lad hissen. Aw'll do it too.'

In a moment of forgetfulness he twisted his mouth into a snarl to emphasize his determination, a movement which caused too great a strain on the piece of flesh-coloured plaister which adorned his lower lip. The reopening of the wound roused the man to an exhibition of unbridled rage in which he dug deep down into a fearful vocabulary to call down maledictions on the Farleighs.

'Mary Farleigh hersen con look owt for trubble,' he almost shouted at his own reflection in the little mirror over the fireplace. 'Aw'll do as Aw like, an' no half dozen o' Jarrockses shall stop me.'

As Charlie Farleigh passed out of the Alabama into the street, he experienced some little difficulty with a lump that would persist in rising up in his throat. It had been a hard task to take his dismissal in silence, but it was almost less distasteful than the one that now lay before him. He had to acquaint Mary with the ill fate that had befallen them.

He needed to go but another dozen yards before

he gathered there was no time left to him in which to prepare the terms of his announcement. Mary and Tom were waiting for him; and the drooping attitude of his sister informed him that she quite accurately gauged the measure of their misfortune.

The moment the girl saw him she squared her shoulders and met him with a smile, which is so often a token of womanhood's silent heroism. As she put her hands into her brother's she exclaimed—

'I'm glad it is over. I can bear it far better than the suspense. Come on home to Belle. We've got each other, and no injustice can alter that.' She hesitated a moment as though lost in thought, and then added: 'If man's on earth there is the Almighty in heaven, and all must yet be well, if we only wait His will.'

'Bless you, Mary,' cried Charlie, as he flung his arms around her and imprinted a kiss upon her forehead, quite regardless of the fact that the footpath rang with the clogs of many toilers hastening to their homes.

But they were not clogshod feet that had brought their owner close up to the little group, quite unperceived, until his voice broke in upon them.

'Are you such a happy family that you must needs give us a public demonstration?' inquired a cultured, kindly voice much to the astonishment of the Farleighs. It was Mary who first found her voice.

'Good evening, sir,' she said, as her pale cheeks flushed rosily. 'We didn't know you were there or——' She hesitated.

'Or you would not have said something that it gave me great pleasure to hear,' completed the Reverend Ambrose Davenant for her. 'I hope, my dear, it was nothing very serious that necessitated such a plain avowal of your faith.'

The clergyman, however, did not wait for a reply. Possibly he knew something of their trouble, and would await a more fitting opportunity to discuss it.

'Can you come round to my house this evening, Mary?' he asked. 'I wish to see you on a matter of perhaps very great importance.'

She inclined her head. It occurred to her that her silent prayers, ever since she knew Charlie was summoned to the overseer's office, were perchance to be answered more speedily even than her abiding faith could have hoped.

'Eight o'clock, then,' said the minister, 'if that will be convenient.' In less than another minute he had shaken their hands, and was disappearing in the gloom in the opposite direction to that in which lay their path towards home.

Mary seized an arm of each of her brothers as they stepped out for Textile Row.

'Come on, boys,' she cried, almost gaily. 'Mr. Davenant has helped me to find the appetite which I thought I had lost.'

Tom responded with boyish enthusiasm, but Charlie was not so easily deceived by his sister's assumption of comparative freedom from care. His humour was too complex for his own analysis. At one moment he was sorry for the blow he dealt John Bilter yesterday morning; and the next he was regretting that he had not a few minutes ago given him a good thrashing on the principle that he might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb.

But his sister rallied him to such good effect, that by the time they had reached Hargreaves Street he had shaken off at least some of his depression. It was useless to 'give his neck' at the very outset of the trouble; there would be time enough for that —perhaps sadly too much time.

Just before they reached home Mary said,

'Now, not a word to Belle. Let her go to her class in peace. She'll hear the news quite soon enough.' And then she added: 'I wonder what it is the minister has to say to me. Oh, I wonder! I wonder!'

CHAPTER V

THE MINISTER MAKES INQUIRY

WHEN Mary and Charlie and Tom reached home, they found that Belle had finished her tea and was already immersed in the preparation of some lessons for the mathematics class that evening at the Technical School. The younger girl looked up from her work to remark upon their unusual lateness.

'Yes, we are rather late,' admitted Mary. 'We met Mr. Davenant, and talking to him delayed us a little.'

'He is a real gem is the minister,' remarked Belle enthusiastically. 'He came into school this afternoon and I feel sure he was talking to Miss Brightwell about me and Maud Bilter. At any rate they kept looking towards us as they talked. And then just before he went, he told me to call at his house on my way home.'

Her seniors did not interrupt her, but they glanced at each other inquiringly, as though they were about to learn the clue to Mr. Davenant's request to Mary.

'And what do you think it was for?' asked Belle.

'I was never more astonished in my life. He offered to help me with my Latin until the scholarship examination in February. He says we will arrange the day and hour each week, but that sometimes he may have to disappoint me, as he never really knows what minute he may be called out.'

'That is a bit of good news,' said Mary. She quite assured herself that her own visit to the minister's was to confirm this one more tangible expression of his interest in the Farleigh family.

Presently Belle set out for class and Tom betook himself to the Boys' Club. Charlie was due at a class, too, but he elected to stay at home, at any rate until Mary went out; and then he would pay a visit to the Free Library to search the advertisement columns of the newspapers. It was a disconcerting thought, that in the present state of trade it was impossible to say how long he might not be a drag upon the little family. It was his wages that provided the few comforts they enjoyed at number sixteen. True, Mary had a little nest-egg, but in the past they had suffered many a pinch to avoid breaking into it; and having retained it intact so long had only strengthened their determination not to expend the money except for the purpose for which they had long intended it.

With the room to themselves, Mary and Charlie quietly conversed upon all kinds of subjects save only that which was uppermost in their minds.

'Who was that young gentleman Mr. Jarrocks was showing over the mill this afternoon?' asked Mary.

'I expect you mean the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers. He's the son, or the nephew, of Lord Fallowfield, and I hear he is in negotiation for the purchase of the Alabama. He has been about the place several times lately; but to-day was the first time he went clean through all the departments.'

'He is exceedingly nice,' replied his sister. 'His pleasant voice and happy laugh seemed to make work go smoother.'

Charlie looked across at his sister in puzzled inquiry.

'Whom was he talking and laughing with?' he queried. 'I know nothing about him, of course, beyond hearing the questions he asked Jarrocks about mule spinning. He was very serious and business-like, I can tell you.'

'Well, if you must know, sir,' said Mary laughingly. 'I think he spoke to me more than anybody else. He kept asking me questions about "drawing," and how I liked the work. And I am sure Mr. Jarrocks did not approve of it. It was most amusing how he kept interrupting, but the visitor wouldn't accept his replies for mine. Somehow I got the impression that he knew something of us. He asked how I came to be so free of the distinctive Lancashire twang, and all the time he seemed to be watching me

so closely as to make me feel almost uncomfortable.'

'Like his confounded impudence,' exploded Charlie. 'I should like——'

'Nothing of the kind,' Mary assured him. 'I've thought over it since. There was nothing the least bit offensive in word or glance. I don't believe he knew he was staring at me, but I am sure I puzzled him. I daresay if the truth were known I reminded him of somebody else, and he was wondering at the chance resemblance.'

Charlie was not very much impressed by Mary's opinion. He thought it far more likely that the visitor had noticed his sister's superiority over the average cotton-spinner, and at once assumed the easy familiarity with her that a girl of his own class would not tolerate from an unknown man, who had not undergone even the formality of a perfunctory introduction.

When Charlie said something to this effect, Mary combated the idea strongly. Four years' service in an industry where boys and girls, youths and maidens, and men and women of all ages are constantly brought together by their daily duties, had well fitted her to judge the attitude of one of the opposite sex towards her. Up to the present she had unerringly gauged the intentions of various young spinners on the look-out for helpmeets; and had quite as unfailingly showed them the hopelessness

of their desires without the necessity of a direct proposal to learn their fate and possibly to embitter them towards her. Of all the hundreds of employés at the Alabama, the manager was the only one of whom Mary was really afraid. She avoided him as far as lay in her power; but only within the last few days she had come to the conclusion that the time was not far distant when she, too, would leave the mill, that she might at least be free from the amorous advances of Mr. William Jarrocks.

Mary did not enlighten Charlie upon these latter points, the knowledge of which would but increase his regret that he had lost his berth, and thus robbed his sister of the small measure of protection his very presence in the mill must have afforded her.

At a few minutes to eight o'clock Mary passed along the street on her way to the minister's house. It was Mrs. Davenant who received her with an apology for the fact that an unexpected visitor had called to ask her husband to show him over the Boys' Club.

'I suppose it is no great secret now who he is,' observed Mrs. Davenant. 'I expect any day we may learn that he is the new master of the Alabama Mill. I daresay you have heard something of the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers,' she hazarded.

'As it happens,' replied Mary, 'I not only saw him

in the mill this afternoon but spoke to him, too. I had no idea who he was until a few minutes ago, when my brother informed me.'

'Then I am sure you will be prepared to learn that he would assuredly prove to be a very worthy successor to poor Mr. Glynn. He is keenly interested in the working classes,' said the minister's wife. 'For the last two years he has been assisting actively in the work of a University Settlement in the East End of London. He spent quite a long time with Mr. Davenant this morning, and inquired most closely into any of our organizations likely to attract the younger employés of the mill. That indeed accounts for his visit to-night.'

It was not until quite half an hour had elapsed that the minister came bustling in. He only stayed a moment to inform his wife that Mr. Ferrers was not returning as they had hoped, but had gone off to his hotel to complete his day's correspondence in time for the late post.

'Now, Mary,' said the clergyman, 'please come with me to my study, where I wish to have a quiet talk with you.'

Ambrose Davenant was an ideal parson for an industrial district. He was a stranger to that mantle of aloofness with which some clergymen mistakenly invest themselves. He was not a brilliant preacher in the ordinary acceptance of the word, but he could deliver the message of his Master in

simple, telling language that seldom failed to reach the hearts of his hearers. For years he had been a travelling secretary of one of the great missionary societies ; and constantly coming into contact with men and women of all classes under widely differing circumstances had given him an insight into the human mind that was simply invaluable in his now settled work. He was a keen judge of character, and he had arrived at a very just estimate of Mary Farleigh, the dying moments of whose mother it was his duty to soothe in the very first few hours of his entrance into Spindleton. This fact alone would have ensured his interest in the orphans, which had but been strengthened during the four years that had elapsed. Mary and Charlie were Sunday-school teachers, Tom was in the choir, and Belle was one of the foremost scholars, not only in the Sunday school, but also in the Council School of which he was one of the managers.

Having installed the girl in a comfortable seat, the minister observed her intently for a moment, as though in doubt exactly how to proceed.

' In all probability,' he commenced, ' what I have to say to you may revive sorrowful memories. If that prove to be the case, I beg of you to believe that it is unavoidable in view of what I consider to be solely in the best interests of you and those belonging to you.'

Mary looked at him with growing wonder in her

eyes. This was certainly no preamble to anything concerning Latin lessons for Belle.

'I know when you lost your mother,' observed the clergyman. 'Can you tell me anything of your father, who he was, where he came from, and when and where he died?'

Mary was intensely surprised at the question, and for a moment was quite unable to reply, and in order to assist her to regain her composure Mr. Davenant proceeded in a lighter tone.

'We sometimes see advertisements,' said he, 'stating that it will be to the advantage of certain persons to communicate with the advertiser. I am unable to make an explicit declaration, but I am desirous of gaining information that may lead to something to your advantage. If that should prove to be the case, nobody will be more pleased than Mrs. Davenant and myself.'

'I am quite sure of that,' replied Mary more wonderingly than ever, but making a brave effort to compose herself the better to assist the minister's purpose.

Mary's recital of her family history occupied very nearly an hour. It was by no means in chronological order and constantly she went back to illuminate some point in reply to Mr. Davenant's questions.

Throughout the interview the reverend gentleman made copious notes, but at its conclusion, as he rapidly perused them, he shook his head musingly.

'I am afraid,' he said, 'that if you will look upon me as the advertiser I referred to, you must recognize that, though you may have communicated with me, I can yet form no conclusion upon the information with which you have supplied me. You have handed to me a few links; but whether we can find others to complete what may be a very long chain, it is impossible to say.'

Mary quite agreed that it did seem very much a case of making bricks without straw, and quite understood that the clergyman was unable to decide whether his inquiry was likely to lead to any tangible result. Not unnaturally she was curious to know the aim of his questions; but her strong vein of common sense repressed it. This was quite as well; for if she had interrogated Mr. Davenant, he would have said not the slightest word to set simmering hopes and aspirations that very likely would never be realized.

The minister urged her not to discuss with anybody else the point he had raised; it would be better not even to mention it to the younger members of the family. Mary did not quite approve of keeping a secret from Charlie, but upon consideration agreed that no good purpose would be served by perhaps setting his mind brooding upon what after all was 'the baseless fabric of a dream.' Even then, however, Mr. Davenant had still more to say; but upon a matter with which Mary was unfortunately only

too familiar. There was little that went on in the mills around him that did not earlier or later, usually earlier, trickle into his study. The clergyman was fully acquainted with the disturbing incidents of Monday morning and evening; and he knew that Charlie had already received a blow, the effects of which only time could estimate.

Probably Mary thought that Mr. Davenant might secure the good offices of Mr. Jarrocks in order to annul the overseer's dismissal of her brother. But nobody knew better than the clergyman himself that he was the last person in the world likely to obtain a favour at the hands of the Alabama manager. He it was who had eased the last days of Mrs. Jarrocks and had brought to her the consolations of the religion to which she had long been a stranger; he it was, who read the service over the remains of the lonely woman only too glad to escape the husband who had proved a curse to the closing years of her existence; and he it was who boldly declared to William Jarrocks the particular kind of despicable man he was, although he pointed out to him how he might yet mend his ways, and thus to some extent rehabilitate himself in the eyes of men, and, what was of infinitely more importance, make his peace with the God whom he had so openly flouted and set at defiance.

'I do not think there is occasion to worry,' observed Mr. Davenant. 'I had a word with Gorman

this evening. He assures me that Charlie will be reinstated very shortly for the very reason they can not easily do without him; and Jarrocks is not likely to let the work suffer just to satisfy the malice of John Bilter, much as those two worthies have in common.'

This was good hearing for Mary, and in better heart she stood up to take her departure.

'It is quite time you were off,' agreed the minister, 'especially in view of Tommy Nobbler's call in the morning. But just step into the dining-room and let Mrs. Davenant give you a cup of coffee.'

While Mary sat sipping the fragrant liquid she heard the clergyman's reply to his wife's inquiry how Mr. Ferrers liked the Boys' Club.

'Delighted with it,' replied he. 'In less than five minutes he had made friends with every boy upon the premises.'

Mary at length set out for home, refusing to allow the minister to accompany her even to the end of his own street. As she laughingly expressed it, she should run every yard of the distance, and if he insisted upon his company he would only delay her.

When she reached home, Mary was able to hearten her brother very considerably by repeating the statement Gorman had made to Mr. Davenant; and Charlie never dreamt of the business that had occupied the major part of her interview with the clergyman.

Long after Mary went to bed she lay pondering upon the matters to which her mind had been directed by the questions so unexpectedly propounded to her. It would have astonished her considerably had she heard the concluding remark of Mr. Davenant to his wife, after he had told her all the main facts that he had elicited from his visitor.

'I should not be the least bit surprised if he is upon the right track,' he said. 'Stranger things have happened, and if it prove so in this case, then the good fortune could not fall to a girl who more deserves it than Mary Farleigh.'

'It would be quite a case of the Sleeping Beauty in real life,' laughed Mrs. Davenant. 'It would be splendid if her fight against odds were to have such a happy ending.'

'Ah!' replied her husband, 'now you are going too fast. If I remember correctly, she was rescued by a prince who married her. Our princess may be a long way off rescue yet—and the other—well, my dear, one never quite knows what may happen in this strange world of ours.'

CHAPTER VI

'NEW EVERY MORNING IS THE LOVE'

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact that Charlie had had a night to sleep upon the untoward fate which had befallen him, he was more miserable than ever when Tommy Nobbler's assault upon the front door roused him to fresh realization that he was the newest recruit of the workless army. While the old man was yet operating on adjacent doors, Charlie had flung on a few clothes and had got the fire alight. Manlike, he did not take kindly to domestic duties, although he never hesitated to put his hand to anything that would ease his sister. Under present circumstances he considered 'mollying' to be his bounden duty, and Mary found herself with nothing to do save partake of breakfast before she and Tom set out for the Alabama.

Charlie's breakfast was but the merest pretence at a meal. His sister begged him to fall to with his usually healthy appetite; but he only shook his head in intimation that the task was beyond him. Seeing the look of concern that passed into her eyes, he affirmed that there was no necessity for an early

breakfast, and promised that he would not neglect the meal, which he would take with Belle some two hours later.

Only when the steam bulls insistently warned the workers that delay was no longer possible did Mary throw her arms round her brother, and beg him to be brave for her sake, if not for his own. She quite correctly judged the effect this appeal would have upon him; and reaped the satisfaction of seeing his shoulders lift to the accompaniment of a more general air of alertness. Possibly she had but little faith in its permanence, but to have achieved so little was at least a break in the gloomy cloud that overshadowed him.

The front door closed with a bang, and within a minute the silence of Hargreaves Street was unbroken by a single pair of hurrying, clattering clogs. Then more than ever did he realize that no longer for him did 'clamorous Labour knock with its hundred hands at the golden gate of the morning.' Without warning he had been relegated to the ever-growing heap of humanity relentlessly scrapped in the race for daily bread. He felt as though his budding manhood had been filched from him, that he might be consigned as the veriest bondslave to doubt, sorrow, indignation and despair.

Before retiring to rest the previous night Belle had been made acquainted with the news that her brother's enforced idleness would allow her an

unexpected measure of self-indulgence in bed; and the fact that at a quarter to eight she had not made her appearance gave proof that she had not neglected her opportunity.

Ever since Mary and Tom had hurried off to the mill Charlie had sat looking into the leaping flames of the fire in the big grate. It would have puzzled him to analyse his own thoughts; his mind was just a dull, grey, heaving ocean of perplexed uncertainty. When at length he glanced up at the clock and perceived the time, he sprang to his feet, and stepped to the door of the stairs which opened into the room. There was, however, no necessity to call his sister; she was awake; and as she dressed, her clear, young treble voiced snatches of a morning hymn—

> New every morning is the love
> Our wakening and uprising prove;
> Through sleep and darkness safely brought,
> Restored to life and power and thought.

As the schoolgirl bustled into her clothes her voice occasionally sank to a whisper, or else she hummed the tune without expressing the words. But the young spinner stood enchained to the spot, involuntarily supplying the missing phrases; and as he joined the unconscious singer above, his depression was chased away as the morning mist on the mountain-side flees before the advance of the glorious sun.

It was a new Charlie who stepped back into the room to busy himself at the breakfast table. He was now all anxiety to take up his 'cross and care' that he might prove in his own case, that the malice of man was but 'a road to bring him nearer God.'

Belle quite enjoyed her *tête-à-tête* breakfast with her brother, wholly ignorant of the fact that she herself was responsible for his lightheartedness. The rather stern realities of life sometimes caused her to take a prosaic view of family matters; and it more than dimly occurred to her that Charlie's apparently happy mood was scarcely in keeping with the seriousness of the position his impetuosity now caused him to occupy. With no clue to guide her she had no idea of her brother's revulsion of feeling of which she was the innocent cause.

At a quarter to nine Belle set out for school, and Charlie bent his steps towards the Free Library, where he found scores of men awaiting the opening of the doors in order to get an early glance at the advertisement columns. As he took stock of some of the human derelicts, their threadbare clothes and wan pinched looks betokening long unemployment, he had not the heart to push his way to the front as he might so easily have done. He lost nothing by his forbearance, for in none of the columns of the dailies were there advertised any local vacancies.

In paper after paper he came across an advertise-

ment that set his thoughts running in a hitherto unconsidered direction. The more he thought about it, the more he was attracted by the prospect held out. Why could he not qualify himself as a chauffeur? The wages offered were far better than for cotton spinning, while to him there was in the occupation all the glamour of machinery entirely under his own control. He did not approve of having to pay a premium to be taught a new calling, but even that difficulty might be overcome if he were once assured of the certainty of a post. At any rate he would write for full particulars and then go into the matter in all its bearings.

Having arrived at this decision did not prevent him commencing the round of all the mills in the district on the offchance that he might alight upon some likely opening for his eager hands. But wherever he called, he met with the almost stereotyped reply that they were discharging hands rather than taking on fresh ones. He called at the factories in an order that would bring him very near home by one o'clock, and consequently he reached Textile Row almost at the same time that Mary and Tom arrived from the Alabama.

Mary needed not to ask whether he had met with any success; his looks were sufficient indication, without putting him to the necessity of acknowledging his failure. She was pleased to note that he was less despondent than she had expected would be the

case ; and when he mentioned motor-car driving she laughingly entered into his idea of abandoning the 'mule' for the aristocratic vehicle.

'Don't drive a smelly one, Wag,' pleaded Tom in mock seriousness. 'Mr. Ferrers drove out of the mill-yard in one just as we were coming home. I got a whiff from it that made me cough down to my socks.'

'It's a lovely red car, Charlie,' remarked Mary. 'Now I shouldn't mind seeing you steering that one.'

The all too short dinner-hour came to an end. Mary and Tom returned to the mill ; Belle went back to school ; and Charlie again went out on the apparently hopeless task of finding employment.

His direction lay past the minister's house, and there at the door stood a great red motor-car, which he rightly judged to be the one they had under discussion a few minutes earlier. How he would have liked an hour or two with it to himself that he might examine it ; for with anything in the shape of a machine he always preferred to find out things rather than rely upon the information of others. But he passed on his way to several of the mills that lay on the eastward boundary of the township.

Charlie's surmise that the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers was within the house was quite correct, but he would have been intensely surprised to learn how closely the gentleman's visit concerned himself, for the clergyman was acquainting Mr. Ferrers with the

results of his interview with Mary Farleigh the previous evening.

Using his notes to guide him, Mr. Davenant commenced to recite a summary of Mary's statements, his visitor listening intently with thoughtfully puckered brows.

Mary remembered that, when she was quite a little girl and Charlie was a mere baby, her father and mother resided in a pretty village in the south of England. Battle in Sussex was its name, as her mother had told her in later years. When her father died, Mary was but eight years of age, and consequently her memory of him was too fragmentary to be of much value. What his occupation was she was unable to say beyond that he was 'something in the City,' which was probably why the family in the meantime had moved from Sussex to Hampstead. They lived there for two years after the death of her father, and then Mrs. Farleigh's means suddenly came to an end. Of details concerning this change in circumstances the girl was wholly ignorant. Mary was ten years old and Belle was only a tiny toddler when Mrs. Farleigh came north to Spindleton on the advice of an old school friend. This friendship was tragically terminated very shortly afterwards by a railway accident in which her mother's friend and her husband were both killed. More than once Mary broke down in recounting the struggles of her mother to provide for

her young family. She tried teaching, embroidery, letting apartments, and finally met with some measure of success in nursing. Just when she was free of the troubled waters that had so beset her, she was called away, to leave the sixteen year old Mary to take up the struggle, not where her mother had left off, but very nearly where she began.

Mary knew for a fact that there was some mystery connected with her mother's marriage. Mrs. Farleigh had intimated as much, and had intended to afford her daughter full details when she was older, but death intervened, and the secret was never revealed.

'But has she not got her mother's marriage certificate or some papers connected with the earlier years of her parents' married life?' asked Mr. Ferrers.

The minister shook his head as he explained that upon one occasion when Mary's birth certificate was required, her mother bewailed the fact that it formed one of a collection of papers which she had entrusted to a lawyer in order to make some inquiries for her. Nothing came of his efforts so far as she knew. Once after they came to Lancashire she journeyed to London to secure the return of the documents, only to find that the lawyer was undergoing penal servitude for fraud, and the firm to whom his practice was transferred could find no trace of the packet described by Mrs. Farleigh.

Mr. Ferrers made an impatient gesture, and then, with his gaze bent upon the ceiling for a few moments,

he gave himself up to a consideration of the information with which the clergyman had supplied him.

'Do you think the matter is worth following up?' queried the clergyman.

'My dear Mr. Davenant, to my mind there's not the slightest doubt about it,' exclaimed the young man. 'The resemblance that first struck me might of course easily have been a chance one. There are some types of face that seem to be duplicated oftener than others. Mere resemblance alone would not enable me to go far in such an inquiry as mine. But when one takes into account the plain evidences of gentility, and some certain indications of something like mystery in the origin of the family, it would be folly not to follow so warm a scent until, at least, one gathered some idea of the direction in which it would ultimately lead.'

The clergyman inclined his head in perhaps doubtful agreement. He did not possess the enthusiasm of youth to render hopeful, what looked like the chase of a will-o'-the-wisp.

'I know just the man who will revel in following up these clues,' said Mr. Ferrers. 'Dudley Forster and I were at school and University together. He is yet blessed with few briefs, and will be able to devote his full energies to a thorough investigation.'

Two minutes later the young gentleman's red car was threading its way through the streets that led to the Alabama Mill.

CHAPTER VII

A STOLEN LETTER

MR. WILLIAM JARROCKS, from the window of his private office, watched the entrance of the car. It was certainly no amiable glance that he bent upon the trim, alert figure that was stepping across the mill-yard towards him. The manager did not view with equanimity the prospective alteration in the proprietorship of the mill. The present arrangements suited him very well, and he realized that a change such as was in contemplation might easily prove inimical to his own interests—and really lately, what with some very unfortunate private speculations in cotton and being clean out of luck in turf matters, the manager's interests required very careful nursing.

Mr. Jarrocks' smile at his visitor as he entered the office was as friendly in appearance as it was possible to conceive, for though he did not desire a change of master, he wished still less for the loss of a position with its more than usual opportunities of illicit additions to a liberal salary. At present he knew practically nothing of how far negotiations had proceeded

towards the completion of the transfer of the mill to Mr. Ferrers. That young gentleman upon the one hand, and the Glynn lawyers upon the other, had so far kept the business to themselves, a course which met with the manager's strongest disapproval; but Bill Jarrocks was astute enough to know that everything comes to him who waits.

'I should like to go round the mill again, Mr. Jarrocks,' said Mr. Ferrers, as the manager rose to receive him; and although the latter expressed an effusive willingness to accompany him he would dearly have liked to veto the proposal. In yesterday's inspection the gentleman had shown such a grasp of business principles, together with a marked desire for information down to the smallest details, that the manager foresaw a certain curtailment of his own powers if the Alabama passed into the hands of Mr. Ferrers.

The present demeanour of that young gentleman rather puzzled Mr. Jarrocks. As they passed through the various rooms he displayed what was little short of positive apathy compared to his alertness and vivacious interest of the previous day.

An inveterate deep schemer himself, Jarrocks concluded that the visitor had some ulterior motive in his apparently useless perambulation of the mill. It was not until they reached the floor where Mary Farleigh was employed, that it was borne in upon him that here lay Mr. Ferrers' real objective; and in

rising wonder and growing resentment, he concluded that it was not nearly so much cotton process the gentleman desired to inspect as to renew acquaintance with the pretty mill-hand.

It needed a great struggle on the part of William Jarrocks to repress visible signs of his displeasure at what he viewed as unwarrantable poaching upon his own preserves. At the back of his mind for some time there had been more than a dim notion of his own ultimate attitude towards the girl, to which at present the recent death of his wife forbade him to give tangible expression. This restraint arose not so much from any compunctions of his own, as from the certainty that any immediate avowal would not only offend the popular sentiment, but would be repugnant to the innate delicacy of the girl herself.

He thereupon indulged himself in a glow of self-righteousness which was as novel as it was illogical. He positively swelled with pharisaical complacency at the thought that to all the mill-girls he stood *in loco parentis ;* his official position made him not only responsible for the physical conditions of the girl labour, but there were moral obligations no less incumbent upon him. He, therefore, instantly decided that he was called upon to prevent one of the Alabama girls having her head turned by the well simulated interest and attention of this young 'sprig of nobility.'

Whatever might be Mr. Ferrers' motive it ill

accorded with the plans of Mr. Jarrocks, and in less than a couple of minutes he had decided to remove the girl beyond the influence of the dangerous attractiveness of the visitor, who failed to observe the hasty instructions which the manager whispered to the forewoman.

The remarks which Mr. Ferrers made to Mary were solely concerned with the operations in which she was engaged, and chiefly that he might verify the purity of tone and the correctness of speech, which went a long way to support the theory which so suddenly took possession of him when he first saw the girl and heard her voice. A break in a sliver caused the machine to check its humming whirl, and the spinner stooped down to twist the two ends, the completion of which would throw the machine into gear. That moment was the forewoman's opportunity. Said she, as she touched the girl on the shoulder, ' Mary, go oop to th' next flore, an' tell 'Ria Kedge Aw wants to spik to her. Watch her machine till her cooms back.'

If Mr. Ferrers recognized the manœuvre, he failed to realize the manager's complicity. He simply raised his hat to the girl as she proceeded on her errand.

The courteous action caused Mr. Jarrocks to curse under his breath. It was an amenity that could have been intended only to depreciate himself in the eyes of Mary. It was one of those outward graces to

which he had never aspired, or at least never put into successful practice; for even when deference to a 'real toff' called for some outward token of polish, he could never get further than a half ashamed dab with his red fist at his hard bowler.

Mr. Jarrocks was pleased to observe that Mr. Ferrers' interest in spinning waned to such an extent that he thoughtfully turned his steps towards the office; and during their progress there the manager regained a good deal of his equanimity.

'Please supply me with a good sized sheet of plain notepaper,' said Mr. Ferrers to the manager as soon as they entered the room. 'I want to write an important letter, and then I think I will go for a spin as far as Manchester. I can easily reach it before it is dark.'

As the Honourable Kenyon's pen traced line after line across the sheet, William Jarrocks commenced to speculate as to what was the purpose of the letter. In all probability it concerned the negotiations with regard to the sale of the mill, and consequently might be of dire importance to himself; a mere sight of it might give him the cue how to play his cards to make his own interests secure. Unconscious of the manager's scrutiny, the writer at length completed his lengthy epistle, and then, after thoughtfully reading it over, with an alteration here and an addition there, he sealed it up in an envelope. In bold characters he wrote the address: Dudley

Forster, Esq., 21 Quality Court, Chancery Lane, London. As he laid down the pen there was a tap at the door. It opened to admit a junior clerk with a telegram in his hand.

'For you, sir,' said he, as he handed it to Mr. Ferrers.

The gentleman tore open the buff-coloured envelope, and as he perused the message an exclamation of astonishment, not untinged with alarm, escaped him. He jumped to his feet.

'I am called away,' he said. 'My brother-in-law has met with a serious accident. The message repeats a cable which my sister has received from America.' Even as he spoke he was getting into his big overcoat.

'Are you going to drive, sir?' inquired the manager.

'Not if there is a convenient train,' was the reply. 'When is the next express to Town?'

The manager was looking at his watch.

'Three thirty-five,' he said. 'You can reach the station in time, even if you walk it.'

'That will suit me nicely,' answered Mr. Ferrers. 'You can house the car for me until I return or send for it.'

The next moment he was striding across the yard, leaving his letter upon the desk. The manager watched him eagerly through the window as long as he was in sight, and when the gate closed upon

him he heaved a huge sigh of relief. Almost in the same instant he gave a short howl of impotent rage as he perceived the young gentleman racing back to the office. The manager made a great show of being immersed in his own work. He appeared quite startled when there was a hasty tapping at the window, and he looked up inquiringly.

'My letter, Jarrocks,' exclaimed Mr. Ferrers. 'Please see that it is posted, will you?'

'I'll attend to it, sir,' replied Jarrocks with heartfelt cordiality. 'You catch your train, sir.'

Twenty minutes later the London express moved out of Spindleton station, and little did Mr. Ferrers think as he lay back in a first-class compartment that William Jarrocks had also hastened to the station, silently and unobserved, to watch his departure.

The manager was highly pleased with himself, and leisurely returned to the mill. He passed through the general office, giving instructions that he was not to be disturbed, no matter who called, or what their business.

From a cupboard he took a little tin kettle, and when he had half filled it with water, he placed it on the fire. Only a few minutes elapsed before it was ready to serve his purpose. He removed the lid and in the rising steam he held Mr. Ferrers' recently addressed letter, until the flap of the envelope could be raised with ease. He sat down and drew out the folded sheet. As he read the contents his face ex-

pressed a whole series of changing emotions, at first astonishment and incredulity, and then a beaming satisfaction at the stroke of luck that had so unexpectedly befallen him.

'Just like these infernal aristocrats,' he muttered. 'Want all the good things, they do.' He mused for a moment. 'That's why he was philanderin' about the gel, but now he's got me to reckon with. No lawyer gets this letter, no fear. A week's delay will do the trick, perhaps less.'

He re-sealed the letter and placed it in his pocket. He rang the bell, which was immediately answered by a clerk.

'Send young Midgley to me,' Mr. Jarrocks said; and a moment later the youngest office-boy was awaiting his pleasure.

From a basket at his elbow the manager took half a dozen letters, which he handed to the boy.

'Tommy, take these letters immediately and drop them into the nearest letter-box,' he ordered. 'They are not to go in the office letter-bag. Hold them tight and drop them in just as they are. One of them belongs to Mr. Ferrers and it may be very important.'

The boy took the letters, and passed out of the room to do the manager's bidding.

'Good business!' ejaculated Mr. Jarrocks. 'If any question arises the boy will swear he posted the letter.'

The man sat smiling in contemplation of his own craftiness. Suddenly some cross current disturbed his contented mood. He pondered for a moment, as if involved in uncertainty as to the best course to pursue. He determinedly sprang to his feet.

'I won't wait a day,' he cried. 'He might come back unexpectedly to spoil me.' Again he rang the bell.

'Johnson,' he said to the one who answered the summons. 'Tell Mary Farleigh to call in at my office at half-past five. Deliver the message yourself.'

The youth passed out to do his bidding, and the manager gave his attention to a mass of papers lying upon his desk.

Five minutes elapsed before Johnson returned.

'She has gone, sir,' said he. 'Asked leave off early, sir, to go to a missionary tea-meeting.'

The clerk was only too well acquainted with the vile humours of the manager, but even he wondered at the look of bafflement that for a moment gleamed in his eyes. He withdrew from the room, closing the door quietly after him.

Mr. Jarrocks took the stolen letter from his pocket, broke open the envelope, and re-perused the contents. He nodded his head approvingly at the closely written lines and his lips twisted into an ugly smile.

'There's money in this or my name ain't Bill

Jarrocks,' he murmured. 'The Honourable Kenyon Ferrers 'll find I've put my finger in his little pie.'

He dropped the letter into the fire and watched the greedy flames seize upon it to wipe it out of existence.

CHAPTER VIII

JOHN BILTER RECEIVES A CHECK

ANOTHER day dawned and Spindleton's whirling bobbins and clattering looms recommenced their demands upon the busy fingers of the operatives. Before she left home with Tom, Mary tried her utmost to chase the gloom from Charlie's rueful countenance. Uppermost in her mind was the thought of Mr. Davenant's inquiry into their family history, and she found herself constantly speculating upon the reason for this sudden interest. Try as she would, she could not help her belief that this present dark hour did but herald a dawn, perhaps near at hand, when their domestic horizon would glow with new hopefulness. But of this she could say nothing to Charlie; it were best not to raise up hopes in him that might prove incapable of fulfilment.

When the machines came to a standstill at nine o'clock and Mary sat down to her second breakfast, Belle was just entering Loombridge Road School, and Charlie was setting out in quest of work. The girl's thoughts were claimed equally by her brother

and sister. If unfortunately Charlie had 'to play' any length of time, their circumstances would become such as to preclude all possibility of realizing their dream that Belle should become a teacher. Perhaps it was just as well that there was little time allowed her for thoughts, sorrowful or otherwise—the factory bell rang out its warning, the machinery resumed its hum and racket, and for the next three hours and a half Mary Farleigh would be but an automatic human adjunct of the big drawing-machine she served.

At school Belle found that Fortune's wheel had been given an unkind twist that would not make for her comfort. Hitherto she had been separated as far as possible from Maud Bilter, but a new arrangement of the scholars placed that unpleasant young lady in the desk immediately behind her. Poor Belle winced at the thought of how admirably Maud was placed for spiteful quizzing of her home-made garments of strong serviceable material. Notwithstanding her fund of common sense she was too much of a girl not to be keenly susceptible to ridicule in the matter of dress. She quite rightly judged that Miss Bilter would forgo no opportunity of making her feel uncomfortable, and she had not to wait long before she was treated to a sample of the better-dressed girl's insolent comments upon her rival. The pupils were quietly conning some notes preparatory to the commencement of the second

lesson, when Maud entered into conversation with her right-hand neighbour, and smothered giggles forced Belle to the conclusion that her 'roasting' was about to commence. The room was very quiet, and she did not catch the opening remarks of Maud or her companion's reply; but she could not fail to understand to what Maud's louder whisper applied.

'A shilling a yard? No fear,' laughed she. 'I know where the stuff came from. It was but eightpence ha'penny, and when Trimmers had their sale it was reduced to six-three. She's worn it ever since last Easter holidays, too,' concluded Miss Bilter with a scornful sniff.

There was an interlude of suppressed laughter, and then Maud's friend made a remark which was inaudible to Belle; which unfortunately was not the case with the louder reply:

'Yes. She looks like a deserter from a jumble sale. Mother says the Education Committee have no business to go picking up scholarship candidates out of the gutter. They ought to insist upon them having——'

With flaming face Belle turned round to her tormentor.

'A less spiteful tongue and decent manners,' interpolated she, in conclusion of the broken sentence.

'Are you talking, Maud Bilter?" inquired Miss Cornish, the teacher of Standard VII.

'No, miss,' replied Maud with affected surprise. 'Belle Farleigh spoke to me, but I'm not sure what she said.'

'Go on with your work, Belle,' said Miss Cornish; and the mild reproof did nothing to soothe the girl's lacerated feelings.

At the end of the lesson, however, the class changed to another room; and Belle tried to avoid close proximity to Miss Bilter and her satellite, and was able to get through the remainder of the morning session without further disturbing incident.

When Charlie came home to dinner there was a prospectus awaiting him from the people in Manchester who advertised for motor-driving pupils. Though he had written for the information, he displayed but very little interest in it. The fee was prohibitive, even if the promise were carried out to find situations for pupils who fully qualified themselves. But only that morning he had read in a daily paper of several pupils suing at law for the return of their fees because a London agency utterly failed to carry out its undertaking.

'I've got no money for useless lessons,' observed Charlie, 'and still less to go to law. But perhaps after all I'll have something to do with a motor, even if it's at the wrong end of the machine.'

Mary cast him a look of inquiry.

'I've put my name down at the tram shed for a place as conductor,' he informed her.

'That'll be a poor sort of billet,' hazarded Tom.

'It'll be better than none,' replied his brother, rather bitterly.

'Besides,' said Mary encouragingly, as she put on her hat preparatory to setting out, 'it would not prevent you going back to mill work as soon as an opportunity offered.'

As Mary neared the Alabama on her return to work she overtook Ned Gorman.

'How goes 't lass?' was his kindly greeting. 'Aw'm varra sorry theest to get a shoart reck'nin' a Satterd'y, but some foak ged t' owd lad's luck betimes.' Then he added reflectively, 'Some foak sim to get it a seet oftener 'an t'others. Aw think it's a queer wurld aback-a-beheend, lass.'

'The world's all right, Mr. Gorman,' replied Mary with a wan smile. 'It's the people in it who cause all the trouble.'

'Mebbe yo're reet,' he agreed. 'Aw'd loike to kick a few on 'em aboon a bit, an' one or tew Aw'd loike to hang. But hangin's a seet tew gud for Jack Bilter,' he added savagely.

Mary could do no less than nod her agreement with a sentiment roughly expressed, but none the less evidence of good-will towards her brother. And when their ways parted, the girl's step lost none of its elasticity for the brief colloquy.

The afternoon was wearing on apace. The hot air of the mill seemed to pulse and throb with the

machinery, every portion of which appeared to form part of one eternal whirl. But there was no lagging on the part of the operatives. Sharp-eyed, and still sharper-tongued, foreman and forewoman lost no opportunity of re-animating flagging energies, and here, there and everywhere, ever on the *qui vive* for a 'slacker,' was John Bilter, whose curses were specially calculated to whip jaded bodies into a despairing spurt.

The overseer was in a specially evil humour. For some minutes he had been up on the fourth floor closely watching Mary Farleigh as she engaged in her work. The girl, though inwardly trembling at the scrutiny, appeared not to recognize his presence, and her attention to her duties afforded him no excuse for the slightest reproof. On the floor below, however, Bilter encountered a man whose lackadaisical motions gave him an opportunity of easing his pent-up feelings in a burst of bad language at his laziness, coupled with a threat of dismissal if he did not instantly mend his ways.

It was an error in tactics. He gave no thought to the fact that the man he thus so forcibly addressed was not only an old, and therefore a rather privileged employé, but he was also distantly related to the manager, a fact upon which he never hesitated to trade if occasion called for it.

Bilter's feelings can readily be imagined when the old man advised him to keep a civil tongue in

his head, if he wished to avoid a repetition of the fate that overtook him on Monday morning under somewhat similar circumstances. The overseer said never a word, but he strode away with his passion at white heat, incensed afresh at the Farleighs by this reference to his ignominious encounter with Charlie.

It was consequently doubly unfortunate that he should a moment later meet young Tom full tilt in a badly lighted passage. It was not the boy's fault that the two empty canisters which he was carrying should fall out of his hands; and he was equally blameless if one of the cylinders rapped Mr. Bilter sharply across the shin. Putting the worst possible construction upon the incident it was an accident; any unbiased witness would have declared the overseer to blame. But Mr. Bilter preferred to charge Tom with a wilful assault. In a flash his hand flew out to cuff the startled and astonished boy, and such was the force of the blow that he was sent headlong to the floor.

'Yo yung toaad,' he cried angrily, and emphasized it with a kick at the prostrate figure. 'Thraw a canister at me, would'st tha? Pick yo'self oop an' walk out o' th' Alabama in double quick time 'fore Aw kick tha through the gaate.'

Tom Farleigh was under no misapprehension. He was fully assured that the trouble was the overseer's own seeking. He resented the blow and still more the attempt to kick him; but his personal

discomfort was nothing compared to 'the sack,' which meant only an addition to Mary's sorrow.

The boy sprang up and with blazing eyes turned on his aggressor in angry protest, but before he could voice a word there was an unlooked-for interruption.

When John Bilter flung himself into the passage he failed to notice that the manager was standing only a few feet away closely examining a handful of sliver, some imperfections in which denoted that the machine from which it was delivered required adjustment. He stepped to the end of the passage to call the overseer, just in time to witness an assault upon one of the young hands. Ordinarily Mr. Jarrocks would have been blind to such a trifling incident, or if it were forced upon his attention he would at least pretend to believe it was a justifiable exhibition of discipline. But the moment he caught sight of Tom's face he perceived that the overseer had provided him with a card, the playing of which might go far in winning the game upon which he had set his heart.

'What's this racket about?' he demanded, as he stepped in front of young Farleigh.

'Mr. Bilter ran into me, sir. He knocked me down and tried to kick me,' burst out Tom. 'And now he's given me the sack,' he added in a rising crescendo.

'That's all right, my lad,' replied the manager

soothingly. 'I can do all the sacking that's wanted. You run down to my office and wait till I come.'

Tom viewed the manager's urbanity with wide-eyed astonishment; but he quite realized the happy fact that he was delivered out of the hand of the enemy.

'Thank you, sir,' he said gratefully; and with an involuntary *move* at the overseer he raced away, leaving the two big canisters where they had fallen.

For a moment Bilter was speechless. His recovery was sharp and to the purpose, as was evidenced by the two bright red spots in the manager's cheeks at the end of but the first few sentences of bitter recrimination.

Although the two men were of exactly similar origin, sprung from the same low stock, restricted by very much the same limitations, the manager possessed a superficial gloss altogether absent in the overseer. When he found that he was steadily rising in position, he was astute enough to realize that a more formal correctness of speech would stand him in good stead, and he was more and more thrown into contact with men of superior education. To that end Mr. Jarrocks placed himself in the hands of a school teacher for evening tuition, and eventually he attained a fairly grammatical diction, which constantly improved as he was increasingly called upon to engage in business matters from which his employer gradually withdrew himself.

That his old crony should have risen to be manager of the Alabama, John Bilter viewed as a positive injustice to himself; and that Jarrocks should have improved his education he considered did but add insult to injury; and he never lost an opportunity of mimicking and ridiculing the speech of the manager, if it were couched in terms outside the Spindleton dialect.

Upon this occasion he noticed with gratification that he had roused Mr. Jarrocks to such a pitch that he quite forgot the admonition of his evening tutor; although in the first of the manager's remarks there was nothing about which he could congratulate himself.

When each angry man in the broadest dialect had declared his opinion of the other, with wholehearted, if undignified, candour, Mr. Bilter demanded definite information.

'What Aw wants to knaw reet here is whether Aw'm the overseer o' th' Alabama.'

Mr. Jarrocks hesitated a moment, looking his opponent squarely in the face the while.

'That is a matter, sir,' he said, reverting to his best manner, 'that at this moment might well require very careful consideration. One thing is certain, and that is that I am the manager, and I will insist upon civility and obedience from the highest to the lowest on the books.'

The tone, and no less the carefully chosen words,

implied a threat that brought John Bilter to his senses with a jerk.

'Aw'm varra sorry theer's enny trubble,' said he, 'but it's all along o' th' Farleigh tykes. The sooner they'n off the ground the better.'

'That is a matter that will no longer rest with you,' replied the manager. 'They will remain at the Alabama, and I'll thank you not to give occasion for any further unpleasantness.'

The look which accompanied the words impressed upon Bilter the necessity to pay due heed to the warning.

The news that Jack Bilter had fallen foul of Tom reached Mary in less than a couple of minutes after its occurrence. She was naturally anxious concerning her brother; but hesitated to leave her post lest the overseer should vent his displeasure upon her. In the midst of her distress Tom suddenly appeared in person. His smiling face was certainly not suggestive of trouble.

'Mary,' he cried, 'Mr. Jarrocks says will you kindly step into his office on your way home? Mr. Bilter set about me for nothing, and the manager took my part. Look what he's given me.' He gleefully exhibited a half-crown. 'Mr. Jarrocks says I can go home now and help Belle to get the tea ready by the time you reach home.'

With a hop, skip, and a jump the boy shot away and disappeared down the staircase.

Mary remained looking at the drawing-frame with unseeing eyes, as she tried to guess for what purpose Mr. Jarrocks required her presence in his office. Her very attitude was that of the frightened doe sniffing the tainted air while yet the stalker is far away.

CHAPTER IX

A REJECTED PROPOSAL

WHEN Mary Farleigh reached the general offices and was making her way towards the manager's private room, she encountered John Bilter. To her surprise he did not favour her with a scowl, but his face lighted up with a sardonic grin that made her cheeks flush and tingle at something which she would have been unable to define. Bilter's amusement was so evidently a mixture of malicious satisfaction and scornful pity, that she was half minded to retrace her steps and go home without seeing Mr. Jarrocks. A moment's consideration, however, convinced her that she was in no position to adopt an independent attitude. Diffidently she tapped the door, and on the instant it opened to exhibit the face of the manager wreathed with an ingratiating smile.

'Come in, Mary,' he said. 'Take that seat by the fire and make yourself comfortable.'

The girl did as she was requested, and after he had carefully closed the door, the manager seated

himself at his desk and apparently became absorbed in some sheets of figures that lay before him.

Outside in the mill-yard the almost fierce clatter of the clogs of the hands, hurrying homewards, died away ; the exhaust pipes of the engine boilers were hissing furiously ; and over the wire blind of the office window the lighted factory windows one after another blinked into darkness.

The manager seemed engrossed to the point of forgetfulness of her presence.

Mary rose to her feet and commenced to draw on her thick woollen gloves.

Mr. Jarrocks looked up with an affected start, as though her movement had recalled him to recollection that she awaited his attention.

'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'The tantrums of that brute Bilter have thrown me behind in my work. I won't keep you half a minute. Look at this for a few seconds.'

The girl took the proffered *Lady's Pictorial.* She did not know that only a few minutes earlier the manager had been out into the street to purchase the paper in the hope that it might prove a useful aid to render her oblivious of the flight of time. It was to the same end that the office clock had stopped at five minutes to six.

Mary delighted in pretty things, and in nothing more than the hundred and one dainty articles of adornment that are only within the reach of girls

of ease and means. She simply revelled in the illustrated fashions.

The room was very quiet ; the silence was broken only by the scratching of the manager's pen and the rustling of Mary's paper as she turned over the pages. Outside there was not now a sound from the boilers, and thus it was the chimes of a church clock penetrated the office.

Mary sprang up determinedly as she exclaimed—

'It is a quarter to seven. I really cannot stay any longer.'

Mr. Jarrocks gave an ejaculation of surprise as he rose to his feet.

'How the time does fly to be sure,' he observed, 'especially with you sitting there so comfortably. It makes me in no hurry to get off to my lonely house.'

He pulled Mary's chair from the hearth and placed his own so that only the corner of the table separated them.

'Now sit down,' he said, placing a pressing hand upon her shoulder to emphasize the injunction. 'I want to speak to you about your brother.'

Jarrocks' lips took rather a grim set as he recognized that she involuntarily shrank from his touch as if it were a searing hot iron, though she took courage from this intimation of the business, and resumed her seat. She sat bolt upright in the chair with her fingers interlaced in her lap ; and her clear, honest

eyes bravely facing the manager, who, with his elbow upon the table, supported his head upon his hand.

'You're in trouble, lass, I hear,' he commenced.

Mary inclined her head.

'I've been telling Bilter what I think about him, and have warned him that in the future it'll pay him to leave you and yours alone, unless he wants to get his own marching orders.'

The girl was too surprised to do more than smile her acknowledgement of the unexpected kindness. Mr. Jarrocks continued—

'I've instructed Ned Gorman to see that Charlie is in his place on Monday morning, and on Saturday he'll receive his wages as though he had worked a full week. Now wasn't that worth waiting for?' he asked, as he dropped his big hand upon one of Mary's, which she had inadvertently placed within his reach.

For a moment she let it remain there. It seemed ungracious to do otherwise in face of his last words. Only when she looked up into his eyes did she hastily withdraw it. In great perturbation she stood up, her eyes shining out of the almost deathly pallor of her face.

'You are very kind, Mr. Jarrocks,' she faltered, 'very kind.' She hesitated, as though to avoid any word that would in the least assist what she was assured was the manager's purpose. 'Charlie will

thank you himself ; he will do it better than I can. I must be going now,' she concluded hastily.

For a moment the man's eyes narrowed almost to mere slits.

'I must say you're not very complimentary,' he blurted out. 'Some of the girls would not be in such a hurry. Now suppose it were 'Ria Kedge or—— '

'Mr. Jarrocks ! '

The protesting exclamation and the resentment in the demeanour of his visitor gave him pause. He had forgotten that only a fortnight earlier Maria Kedge had been fined for drunkenness.

With her hand to her bosom and a warm flush of shame chasing into her pale cheeks, mantling her forehead, and extending to the bit of lace edging at her throat, she turned upon him.

'I am not Maria Kedge,' she asserted hotly. 'I—— '

But the restraint which her pale aloofness had imposed upon the man vanished at the sight of her warm, palpitating, outraged womanhood. He threw his arm round her waist and drew her towards him.

'I know you are not,' he exclaimed penitently. 'That is just why I want you to come to me. You're too good to work in a mill, and I can give you everything to make you happy—money, clothes, and everything else that a woman sets her heart on. There's nothing between us but that I'm older than you. But they say it's better to be an old man's

darling than a young man's slave. It's true, every word of it. You're mine, and nothing can come between us.'

Such a torrent of words would have been impossible in his cooler moments; but he was beside himself with the overpowering desire of possession of this queen among the mill-girls.

So unexpected was his action and so impetuous his speech, that the girl was paralysed into momentary quiescence. All she did was to turn her head, to avoid his burning gaze; and encouraged by her silence to believe that he was making an impression, he proceeded feverishly —

'You'll be able to give all the girls you know the go-by; live in a big house; have your little governess cart; and hold your own with anybody in Spindleton.'

With scarcely a halt for breath he made haste to drive home still further the advantages he could offer.

'See what I could do for your brothers and sister. Charlie could train on to take my place; the younger one could be educated to fit himself for any berth the spinning world can offer; and your sister could be sent to a ladies' college to prove the making of her.'

Mr. Jarrocks paused that he might glean from Mary's face the effect of his appeal.

For just a moment she was tempted to snatch at the good things which vagrant fortune offered to her.

It meant the end of the sordid struggle for bare subsistence ; and, more than anything for herself, it ensured success and happiness for those she loved.

It was but for a moment, however. Upon her mental horizon there entered the vision of a face markedly intellectual in character, the brown eyes brimming with happy laughter. It seemed as though a curtain obliterated the features for a moment ; and when it was withdrawn a wave of seriousness had sent the laughter back from whence it came. The eyes appeared to plead with her to weigh well her decision ; the firm and shapely lips distinctly outlined the negative syllable.

It was passing strange that the image of Kenyon Ferrers should be summoned up by her distracted mind at such a moment. Twisting herself out of his grasp, Mary Farleigh faced Mr. Jarrocks, her eyes flashing, her bosom heaving, her lips impatient to declare her decision.

'Doubtless you mean to do me honour, Mr. Jarrocks,' she commenced, 'but I fail to recognize it any more than I sought it.' She considered a moment in bitter reflection.

'You say there is no obstacle but age between us. There is more. There is that poor creature only laid to her rest in Spindleton cemetery two short months ago.'

The man made a motion as if to interrupt her, but with an imperative gesture she restrained him.

'She's dead, I know,' she continued, 'but the memory of her bitter wrongs will ever come between you and any woman with an atom of respect for her sex. Don't touch me,' she almost screamed, shrinking from his outstretched hand as though from a leper.

For a moment there came an evil gleam into Jarrocks' eyes, and bitter words sprang to his lips; but by a great effort he mastered his anger; there was humility in his tones.

'I've been too abrupt; I've startled you. I must give you time to get accustomed to the idea. I'll wait awhile, and when you've considered all that it means I will ask for an answer. For the present things shall go on as they are. It won't be long before my pretty bird comes to me of her own accord.'

There was a quiet confidence in the last words that roused the girl to a stinging retort. But there came a sudden and unexpected interruption. Somebody was rapping firmly at the door, following it up by turning the handle only to find it locked.

Mr. Jarrocks held up a finger in warning to Mary to maintain silence; but intuitively the locked door caused her to recognize her compromising situation. Even now its opening might prove too late to save reflection upon her good name.

'I'll call for help unless you instantly unlock the door,' said Mary; and the tone left no room for doubt concerning her determination.

C.A.O.

The manager strode across the room and flung it open.

It was Charlie Farleigh who stood there, and the moment he recognized his sister's presence he did not stay to request permission to enter. He might have to wait years before he would find himself again so warmly welcomed. In relief of her tension the girl literally threw herself into her brother's arms, which together with the locked door, caused the young man to come to a conclusion far more severe than the occasion actually warranted.

'You've been annoying my sister,' said Charlie, in tones low, but ominously threatening.

'Nay, lad, I've been asking her to be my wife; and that's an annoyance some folks would like.' He smiled rather strainedly.

'She's going to think it over,' he continued. 'It's come upon her a bit suddenly, but you might have a worse addition to the family than Bill Jarrocks. What do you say, lad?' he asked.

But Charlie did not know what to say. He knew what was uppermost in his mind, but it would not be politic to express it until he had learnt his sister's views.

'We've been talking about you, too, Charlie,' the manager added. 'I've reinstated you, and I want you back in your place on Monday.'

Charlie was upon more certain ground here. His reply was prompt and to the point; and if it sur-

prised the manager it came as a positive shock to Mary.

'You might have saved yourself the trouble,' said Farleigh. 'I'm not coming back on Monday or any other time. I've done with the Alabama, and so has Mary. I've got a better job than spinning, and I can afford to keep her at home.'

A minute later Jarrocks was left to himself. He stood looking into the fire, cursing loudly at the unknown good fortune of the Farleighs.

CHAPTER X

FORTUNE'S SMILE

EVEN before they had traversed the short distance that lay between the mill and Textile Row, Mary gleaned the main particulars of her brother's unexpected stroke of luck. At first she had feared that Charlie's statement to the manager was but the sheerest bravado, but out in the street he very speedily undeceived her.

'What is it, Charlie?' she asked breathlessly.

'You wouldn't guess in a month of Sundays,' he laughed. His gaiety was positively infectious, and she joined him spontaneously even before she knew the glad cause.

'Don't keep me in suspense,' she cried. 'You don't know what I have been going through.'

Charlie was sobered in a moment.

'It isn't a fact that you're considering whether to marry that old hunks, is it?' he inquired solicitously.

'Not if he were the last man on earth,' she replied. He's—well you know what he is,' she concluded.

'I wish I had been sure of it before we came out,' said her brother regretfully. 'I might have told

him a few things my tongue was longing to say. Bilter is an inhuman beast, but Jarrocks is just a pollution of the earth he walks on. He——'

'I wish to forget him,' interrupted Mary. 'I want to know all about the fortune into which you have so unexpectedly come. You don't really mean I'm to stay at home. Oh, Charlie! It cannot really be so good as that.'

'Three pounds a week will run to that much, I think,' laughed her brother. 'We'll try at any rate.'

'Three pounds?' cried Mary incredulously. 'Are you an overseer or a manager or what? Why don't you tell me, you tantalizing wretch?'

'I'm a chauffeur,' replied he. 'Just a chauffeur and nothing else. My car is a red one, a regular daisy she is. My new boss is on his way to America, and goodness knows when he'll come back.'

Mary released her affectionate pressure of his arm in disappointment. The good fortune appeared to be melting away under closer inspection. Her brother's next words reassured her.

'But the money is all right—three pounds a week—and an engagement for three years certain.'

He paused in the exuberance of his joy to commence to dance a breakdown in the middle of the pavement.

'If you don't stand still, and, right where you are, tell me all about it straightforwardly and sensibly, I'll never speak to you again,' said Mary almost

testily. 'Can't you understand what it means to me?'

'Yes, old girl, I can,' replied Charlie; and he proceeded to tell her all about it in detail, while she stood with glad surprise in her widening eyes.

'It is wonderful,' she whispered; but she did not tell Charlie how the vision of Kenyon Ferrers had come to her aid in her interview with Mr. Jarrocks.

This was what in brief had actually happened. Charlie had barely got home to his tea, after an afternoon's vain search for work, when Mr. Davenant called upon him with a letter which he had received from the Hon. Kenyon Ferrers dated only that morning from Liverpool, from which port the gentleman was sailing immediately for America. He desired the clergyman to offer the post of chauffeur to Charlie at £3 per week wages with a definite engagement for three years. While Mr. Ferrers was absent, Charlie was to attend the Manchester garage for tuition in driving. As soon as he had mastered the mysteries of his new occupation, he was to use the red car, which was housed at the Alabama, in order to gain additional experience. If Farleigh accepted the post, his new master hoped to find him thoroughly expert by the time he returned.

'And have you accepted, Charlie?' inquired Mary.

'On the nail,' laughed he. 'It didn't need a moment's consideration.'

'I should think not,' agreed Mary as she wiped the glad tears from her eyes. She again seized his arm and together they literally skipped along in joyful step, just for all the world, as Charlie expressed it, 'like two silly school kids with an unexpected half-holiday.'

'Say like two thankful kids,' suggested Mary. 'God has been very good to us in so quickly lifting the trouble from our shoulders.'

'It all comes of having two good sisters,' observed Charlie seriously, as he thought of Mary's profession of faith on the night of his dismissal, and Belle's morning hymn only as recently as yesterday. Involuntarily the thought set him humming the tune, to which Mary supplied the words, although she possessed no key to what prompted him.

Instinctively she selected the second verse, and at its conclusion brother and sister relapsed into silence, their hearts filled with the 'new mercy' vouchsafed to them, that could not fail to lead them to 'New thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.'

The good fortune of the Farleighs was rapidly the one topic of conversation among the Alabama employés; and just after their humble supper old Tommy Nobbler called to inquire whether it was correct that his services would not be required in the morning.

There was no reason to doubt the sincerity of his quaintly expressed congratulations, even though the altered circumstances of the Farleighs meant the forfeiture of sixpence a week, which he could ill afford.

'But wheer does Tummy cum in?' he inquired. 'He inna moterin'. Th' yung bird'll want callin'. Dang it all, Aw'll call him for tuppence juist tew show theer's noa ill-feelin'.'

'Tom has finished at the Alabama,' replied Charlie decisively. 'A youngster can find a job at another mill easily enough. If he can't, why he must learn motor driving too.'

This statement made the younger Farleigh jump in his seat. It occurred to him that he would be very hard to please in the matter of getting a new situation in a mill.

The old man presently took his departure, and a little later he was retailing the news to his wife.

'It does onybody reet gud tew hear o' luck coomin' tew th' reet foak,' he concluded. 'Mary Farleigh's aboon enny gel Aw knaws. Hoo'd mak a rare wife f'r onybody 'at has th' sense tew get her—hoo wud that.'

Probably in only two quarters was there dissatisfaction at the improvement in the outlook of the Farleighs.

John Bilter professed to be profoundly sceptical. He said he had seen lots of rockets go up in his time,

and had never known one to return to earth except as a useless memento of a brief sparkling flight into space.

Mr. Jarrocks expressed no opinion aloud; but it needed little perspicacity on his part to judge that his 'pretty bird' would need more snaring than he had calculated. All through the day he revolved matters in his mind, racking his brain to find some possible plan by means of which he might get Mary into a position that would permit him to apply pressure to attain the fulfilment of his growing desire to possess her for his very own.

It was not until evening that the mazes of his tortuous mind evolved an ill-defined scheme that promised at least the elements of success. The idea was prompted by a visit from Charlie, who appeared at his office a few minutes after the hands had departed for the day.

Charlie was the secretary of a sick and dividend club, the members of which were confined almost entirely to the mule-spinners, an institution quite separate from the Provident Society of which nearly every employé at the Alabama was a member. It was to hand over his books that Farleigh now sought an interview with the President and Treasurer of the club.

But the manager pooh-poohed the idea of the secretary's resignation. In Christmas week the funds were shared out among the members and the

club automatically came to an end; and Charlie would be conferring a favour upon everybody concerned by retaining his position until the annual winding up. And the young man willingly fell in with the proposition that was so amiably presented to him.

If mortal eyes could but peer into the future only a few short days ahead, what worlds of sorrow would suffering humanity escape!

The question of the secretaryship concluded, Mr. Jarrocks warmly congratulated Charlie upon his new appointment, but deprecated the decision to remove Tom from the mill.

'I was making up my mind to push him on in a way that would surprise you,' he said, 'partly because I've taken a real liking to the lad, and more still because of the feelings I entertain for your sister.'

Charlie viewed the manager from under lowering brows, which the man either did not perceive, or else he failed to read the warning which the frown ought to have conveyed. He continued:

'In the ordinary course it would seem improper to mention marriage so soon after the death of my late wife; but my friends, who know the circumstances, wouldn't wonder at my seeking the happiness that for many unfortunate years was denied me.'

Charlie was disgusted at the effrontery of the man in posing as a martyr for what lay entirely at his

own door; but with apparent artlessness he played up to his despicable humour.

'I did not know the late Mrs. Jarrocks,' he said. 'I suppose it was her fault that you lived unhappily.'

'My tongue is tied,' was the sententious reply. 'We must not speak ill of the dead.'

'Quite so,' answered Charlie, 'but a little bit of plain speaking to the living eases one's mind, even though it serve no other good purpose. What I am going to say I should have said last night, but that you misled me.'

'I am quite sure I misled you in nothing,' protested Mr. Jarrocks. 'At any rate I didn't do it purposely. If you misunderstood me the blame may not be wholly mine. Of course I haven't the remotest idea to what you refer.'

'You told me,' continued Charlie warmly, 'that you had asked my sister to be your wife——'

'Which was the exact truth,' interrupted Mr. Jarrocks.

'And that she was going to think it over,' continued the young man.

'Oh! come now, you are a little too severe,' said Mr. Jarrocks with well-assumed jocularity. 'Nobody takes a woman's "nay" seriously—especially a young woman,' he added with a broad smile. 'I consider I was quite justified in viewing the matter in such a light.'

'Nothing of the kind,' asserted Charlie in rising

heat. 'She gave you to understand that the mere suggestion of any union with you was distasteful to her. Nay more than that, it was a positive insult to any decent-minded girl.'

'Insult?' repeated Mr. Jarrocks, as though his hearing must have played him false. 'If you were a little older you would make better choice of your words.'

'Aye, insult!' insisted Charlie. 'You hounded one poor lonely soul off the earth. She must have been lonely,' he explained. 'She couldn't have had any brothers, or they would have thrashed you within an inch of your life years ago. It would have taught you better manners, and Mrs. Jarrocks might still have been alive.'

Mr. Jarrocks' face took on an ashen hue. He struggled for a moment as if with rising apoplexy; but he did not speak until he had regained control of himself.

'I'm afraid if you were to repeat that statement in the hearing of a third person, you would find yourself liable to a criminal action for libel.'

Mr. Jarrocks' words were expressed with judicial unction, and a paternal air of being forced to make allowance for the impulsiveness of youth.

'I haven't the slightest intention of making the statement to anybody else but the one directly concerned,' replied Charlie. I've only to add that Mary wouldn't marry you if you were the last man

on earth. Those are her own words. I would sooner place her in the cold grave alongside your persecuted wife than into your arms.' Fiercely he negatived an interruption, that he might conclude.

'You may take that as definite and final; and if you so much as annoy her again with a single word upon the same subject, I'll horsewhip you in Spindleton High Street as sure as my name's Charlie Farleigh.'

And to show that he meant that to be his last word he swung out of the room, leaving Mr. Jarrocks to indulge in a rage which twisted his features into demoniacal shapes that it were well nobody could witness.

The paroxysm over, he stood still for a moment, while he announced, only half aloud, but in tones terrible in their dialectified earnestness:

'Aw conna abear th' thought o' what th' varmint said tew me. Aw'll get even wi' him; Aw'll breck him an' his pratty sister; Aw'll fotch 'em all into th' gutter afore th' year's eawt.'

CHAPTER XI

DISMISSED FROM SCHOOL

FRIDAY morning was quite like a Bank Holiday at the Farleighs. From sheer habit the three elders awoke just about the time that Tommy Nobbler entered Hargreaves Street. It was pleasant to think that they could disregard his warning, delivered with his usual feverish haste on the drab-coloured doors. They had shaken off the trammels of Giant Cotton and could afford to laugh at his hurrying myrmidon.

To their amazement Tommy treated their door to the usual tattoo, and Mary willingly entered into the spirit of the old man's fun. Throwing open the window she called out:

'Go away, Mr. Nobbler, or we'll send for the police. We've retired from the cotton business.'

'Reet, lass! Aw'm glad on't. Aw on'y knocked to gie yo' gud mornin', friendly loike.' Tommy laughed as he moved on in the darkness.

Their eight-o'clock breakfast was a pleasant meal; and the happy, laughing quartette formed a great contrast to the four sober-eyed individuals

who had been enveloped in gloom more or less since Monday.

Immediately the meal was concluded Charlie was going to Manchester, and Tom was to accompany him by way of a special treat, the expenses of which Mr. Jarrocks' new half-crown would liquidate. Mary had proposed that the money be returned to the manager, but the boy stoutly resisted what he considered the height of absurdity. He knew nothing of any particular reason to give rise to the suggestion; and Mary and Charlie decided to give him no cause to alter his opinion that Mr. Jarrocks was not a bad sort of chap, when you knew him. It would at any rate have taken a lot to persuade Tom that the manager was in reality more objectionable than Jack Bilter.

This morning Belle exhibited a marked unwillingness to go to school, and but for the fact that she really could not afford to waste a half day she would have indulged the holiday humour, which the occasion seemed fairly to warrant.

When she was at length left to herself Mary could scarcely realize that she was free of the interminable slivers whose flimsy coils bind so tight ligaments round the limbs, and no less the minds, of those who spend their waking hours in securing their fluffy perfections. Before very long the Alabama Mill was completely out of her thoughts, as she commenced to give full play to her passion for house-

wifery in a thorough cleaning of number sixteen from top to bottom.

When Belle returned from school at half-past twelve she had not to hurry in order to prepare the dinner for her elders; she came on her way more leisurely in the sure knowledge that the meal would be well forward by that time. That, however, was insufficient to account for the exuberant spirits in which she came up Hargreaves Street, and which attracted Mary's attention the moment she stepped within the house.

'And pray what possesses you, mademoiselle?' inquired the elder girl.

Instead of answering, Belle commenced to pirouette around the little room with the easiest abandon imaginable.

'Let me tell you I've only just completed thoroughly cleaning this room,' said Mary with mock severity.

'Never mind the room, or cleaning, or anything,' cried Belle, seizing her sister and twirling her round and round. 'Nothing matters except that we've got half a day quite unexpectedly, thanks to an inspector paying us a visit this morning. We all wanted to kiss the dear man.'

'Poor fellow!' cried Mary, 'what a fate in return for a kindness.'

'Go along, you spiteful thing,' retorted Belle gaily. 'I don't suppose he would mind the least little bit.'

'I daresay he would like it,' agreed Mary laughingly. 'And it is jolly you getting holiday on this, our Emancipation Day, of all others.'

Their brothers would not return home earlier than teatime, and the girls sat down to dinner, Belle enlivening the meal with an account of how the school had acquitted itself during the inspection.

'I tell you what we'll do this afternoon,' said Mary. 'We'll go to the cemetery. It will be so much better than going on Sunday afternoon when there are always such crowds of people. It will seem almost like telling dear mother of the good fortune that has come to us.'

'She knows, Mary,' said the younger girl. 'She knows everything that happens to us. Sometimes in my sleep I see her bend down over us. There is always a pale shining light around her head, but there's love in her eyes just as though—just as though she could eat us,' she added, with childish artlessness.

Mary bent her swimming eyes on her plate for a moment.

'I see her too,' she said, looking up again. 'Sometimes I have wished she could have taken us all with her, but now I believe it is all for the best. Even the troubles have made us love each other more.'

Belle rose from her seat, and, coming round to her sister, leant her head upon her shoulder.

'They've made us love you, dear,' she said.

'Ask the boys and they'll tell you what they think of "Mother Mary."'

The heart of the elder girl was very full. This was the love that counted; this was the love before which money, clothes, a big house, and a governess cart faded into nothingness.

At three o'clock the sisters set out for the cemetery, first calling at the market hall to purchase a few simple flowers to lay on the turf that covered the last resting-place of their mother. The early-fading light permitted a stay of but a few minutes, but it was sufficient to suffuse their hearts with peaceful content to crown the quiet thankfulness, that possessed them at the thought that their domestic barque had escaped the troublous waters which had buffeted it for four long weary years.

Little they recked that the storm had but subsided that it might gather strength with which to assail them afresh.

When the girls reached home they found that Charlie and Tom had returned home from Manchester, and the former was exceedingly pleased with the prospect before him. Part of his tuition included a course of instruction in a big motor-repairing shop, than which nothing was so likely to satisfy his love for the mechanical. The girls listened with the greatest interest to his account of the interview with the motor people.

It would have been surprising had Charlie not been in high spirits, for the arrangements made by Mr. Ferrers were complete enough to satisfy the most exacting. The tuition fee was already paid in advance, and the minister was supplied with funds out of which to pay him his weekly wage and to obtain a railway season ticket between Spindleton and Manchester.

When the 'shover,' as Tom called his brother, went off to take his club books to Mr. Jarrocks, the result of which has already been set forth, the boy was commencing to let his imagination run riot concerning the red car, now lying idle in an outbuilding of the Alabama.

'We shall give Spindleton fits,' said he, 'when we come out in the car in real high style.'

'Don't talk absurdly,' said Mary. 'We shall not go in the car.'

'That's all you know about it, Mary,' replied her brother. 'Charlie says that we shall. Mr. Ferrers left word that, so as to make himself thoroughly proficient, the car must be used as though it were our very own.'

The girls were too astonished to make comment, and the bright-faced lad proceeded—

'We shall go scooting about, running over fat policemen, knocking lamp-posts down, and now and then run into an electric tram-car for a change. Oh! we shall see life, I tell you.'

'And pray what do you think Mr. Ferrers would say?' demanded Mary.

'By the time he comes back it will be too late to say anything,' responded Tom. 'His car will be worn to smithereens; Charlie's licence will be cancelled; Charlie himself will be in jail because he can't pay the fines; and we shall be in the hospital with broken necks and things, and—and——'

'And what else?' asked Charlie, who entered at that moment.

'I was just telling them you'll take us out in the car to practise driving. If we get thrown out or blown up it won't matter much, but if you did such a thing to the boss, he'd give his new "shover" the shove.'

Charlie joined in the general merriment. 'You've got too much to say for one of the unemployed,' he said. 'We shall have to send you back for another spell under Jack Bilter. He'll take the "petrol" out of you.'

'Oh! my!' exclaimed Tom. 'Just listen to swank. He won't mention "steam"; it sounds too much like "cotton." But there's no more Bilter for me, let me tell you. It's a poor family that can't support one gentleman.'

With this parting shot he snatched up a book and hurried off to the Free Library to change it for another.

When, later in the evening, Charlie told Mary of

his plain speaking to Mr. Jarrocks, she rejoiced, if only for the fact that it would prevent the manager repeating his offer of marriage, and save her the annoyance of reaffirming her refusal.

'You've settled something else, I expect,' she said reflectively. 'If we get any wages at all, it will be only for the exact number of hours we have worked this week.'

Charlie did not believe that they would fare even so well as that, for Mary and Tom, having left of their own initiative without notice, legally forfeited a week's wages; and for himself he could only claim to be paid up to the moment that John Bilter dismissed him.

To their intense surprise Ned Gorman called upon them on Saturday afternoon, and laid upon the table the full sum to which they would have been entitled for a whole week's work.

'Mestur Jorrocks has sent yo' th' brass. He's payin' in full juist f'r luck, he ses.'

But to the foreman's astonishment the Farleighs refused to accept more than two days' pay for Charlie and four days' for Mary and Tom. They could not fathom the reason of the manager's peace-offering, but all the same they preferred not to accept even a penny favour at his hands. And from that decision Gorman could not move them.

On Monday morning Charlie set out for Manchester, Belle for school, and Tom to find fresh employment.

It only needed for this last to be achieved to complete Mary's happiness. Nor had she to wait long. Tom paid visits in the morning to two mills and each was drawn blank, but in the afternoon he met with success at the very first attempt. His new berth at the Kentucky Mill was an improvement in at least two respects—he was engaged in the warehouse at two shillings a week increase, while his hours were but from eight o'clock till six.

When Tom came home at half-past three to report his success to his sister, she literally cried for joy that now everything looked like plain sailing. A few minutes later she retired to her bedroom, from which presently came a sound that drew Tom to the foot of the stairs. He listened for a moment.

'Funny girl our Mary is,' he soliloquized. 'First she cries and now she prays for joy. But you can't laugh at her. Our Mary's a brick.'

A noise in the little scullery attracted his attention. He threw open the door, and there to his amazement stood Belle, sobbing as if her heart would break.

With a bound the boy was at the foot of the stairs.

'Mary! Quick! Belle is here. She's——'

He hesitated for the simple reason that he had omitted to ask the cause of his younger sister's distress.

But in a flash Mary was down-stairs and in the scullery, with Belle in her arms.

'Whatever's the matter, Belle? Hush, dear!

You mustn't cry like that. Come, tell me your trouble.'

Belle did not remove her face from her sister's breast, and for a moment Mary failed to grasp the meaning of the muffled words.

Then as they burnt their way into her consciousness, she pushed the schoolgirl out at arm's length.

'Dismissed from school?' she repeated in tones of mingled surprise and horror. 'They say you are a thief?'

Belle did not reply. Her swollen cheeks assumed a deathly pallor, and before a hand could be extended to her assistance she fell prone at Mary's feet.

CHAPTER XII

A PLOT THAT FAILED

BELLE FARLEIGH'S announcement of the reason for her early return from school was a veritable bombshell, dropped into the midst of her sister's joyous content, which it splintered and wrecked beyond all recognition. For the present, too, it was aggravatingly hopeless to attempt to speculate upon the origin of the trouble, for Belle recovered from one swoon only to fall into another, with intervals of hysterics between. It was evident that the girl had suffered a nervous shock temporarily to shatter her reason. Mary was almost beside herself. She was filled with dread of the sinister charge against her sister to which she could not yet oppose even a bare denial of guilt; she was equally concerned at the mental anguish which Belle's condition only too surely indicated.

But with the realization of her sister's possibly critical state came a stoical calmness to ensure all possible steps to relieve the sufferer. With the assistance of Tom the girl was carried upstairs to the little front bedroom, and very shortly Mary

had got her sister undressed and safely into bed. It was not until an hour had elapsed that the hysteria subsided, and Belle fell into an uneasy slumber without so much as a word to ease Mary's aching heart.

'Thief! thief!' was the word that beat insistently in the elder girl's brain, as she racked her mind in a hopeless endeavour to seize upon some clue to the accusation.

Charlie's homecoming, at the end of his first day's experience in his new vocation, was very different from the one he had anticipated. There was no sign of tea, which in itself was a cause for wonder. At the table, the picture of abject misery, sat Tom, with his head between his hands; and when his brother addressed him, the boy only pointed mutely upstairs.

Charlie took the steps two at a time, but, nevertheless, as gently as possible, for instinctively he gathered it was an occasion for silence. Briefly Mary acquainted him with the meagre knowledge she possessed; and together they stood and viewed the wan face of the sister upon whom so many of their hopes were built.

Half an hour later Mary had snatched a hasty tea, and was putting on her hat and jacket. She had decided to pay a visit to Miss Brightwell, the head mistress of Loombridge Road School, that she might learn the details which the condition of her sister did not allow the girl to communicate.

'I will hurry there and back,' she said to Charlie. 'If Belle wake and is still hysterical or delirious, call in Mrs. Evans until I return.'

The woman she mentioned was a neighbour, one of the very few whom Mary consulted, when in need of the advice of some one of more years and experience than herself.

The next moment a knock at the door, together with a voice speaking to Tom, who had answered it, announced to Mary that the desired information was at hand; for in all probability it was nothing else that prompted the call of Mr. Davenant.

The clergyman did not stay a moment in the little front parlour; he came straight into the kitchen, taking in at a glance that the youngest member of the family was not present.

'I came to see Belle,' said the Vicar. Voice and mien suggested neither accuser nor judge, but only a real solicitude that brought soothing to Mary's troubled spirit.

'Oh, Mr. Davenant, Belle is ill!' cried she. 'Can you tell us what happened to cause her to be sent home in disgrace?'

'I very much doubt whether I know the exact facts,' he answered. 'There are only two, or at most three, persons who can enlighten us—one is Belle and another is Maud Bilter. It is chiefly the word of one against that of the other.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Mary. The monosyllable was

very expressive of the weight she would attach to any statement of Miss Bilter's. Already the girl felt immeasurably better. She at least would require more than the word of a Bilter to convict her sister of even a more venial offence than dishonesty.

'I fear that Miss Brightwell acted hastily,' proceeded the clergyman. 'She came to the decision upon very incomplete evidence. But then,' he urged, 'she knew of no reason to cause Maud Bilter to perjure herself. Of course, my dear,' he continued, almost apologetically, 'you understand, I want to hold the balance fairly between the two girls. It will be better if I tell you all I know of the incident from the beginning.'

When the girls came in to school from recreation in the middle of the afternoon, Maud Bilter informed the head mistress that somebody had taken a Kruger shilling out of the pocket of her coat which hung in the cloak-room. Polly Slater volunteered the information that she had seen Belle with Maud's outdoor garment actually in her hands, while most of the girls were engaged in their play.

Naturally Miss Brightwell had to take cognizance of the reported loss, especially in view of what was an implied charge against Belle. The mistress quite expected the girl would indignantly clear herself of suspicion; but to her intense surprise she exhibited a confusion and distress quite painful to witness.

Miss Brightwell, notwithstanding an affection

for her clever scholar, was all the more compelled to sift the matter to the bottom, lest she laid herself open to the charge of favouritism.

Belle admitted having had Maud's coat in her hands, but maintained that she had found it lying on the floor, and she had but replaced it on the hook from which it had fallen. She vehemently protested that she had not touched the pockets of the garment, and the mistress was quite prepared to accept her word and dismiss her from the matter.

Then to Miss Brightwell's intense surprise Belle produced a Kruger shilling, which she stated she had found as she crossed the public recreation-ground on her way to school at a quarter to two.

The case appeared to assume another aspect. The coin was certainly Maud Bilter's, for that young lady with great satisfaction pointed out her initials, which she had scratched in tiny letters upon its reverse. Maud declared that the coin was in her possession at least an hour later than when Belle said she had found it; and this Polly Slater corroborated, asserting that she not only saw it as late as a quarter to three o'clock, but she had actually had it in her own hands, and had taken an impression of it with a little square of tinfoil which she used as a bookmarker. The mistress called for the production of this impression; and it was promptly handed up for her inspection.

Miss Brightwell was deeply grieved that the weight

of evidence was so entirely against Belle. She wished to consult with Mr. Davenant, but knew that he was absent from home for the afternoon. Eventually she decided that, pending further consideration of the case, it would be advisable for the accused girl to remain at home. Belle had not been dismissed; she had been temporarily suspended; and Miss Brightwell would only be too delighted if any favourable development justified the removal of the embargo.

At the earliest possible moment the head mistress had laid the case before the clergyman for his opinion and advice; and immediately he very considerably astonished her by suggesting possible malice on the part of one of the accusers, although at the moment he could detect no flaw in the joint evidence of Maud Bilter and her friend.

There the matter stood at present. It must be confessed that the Farleighs were quite convinced that their sister was absolutely innocent; their painful experience of the Bilters was little likely to lead them to any other conclusion. Their sole concern was to restore Belle's peace of mind; and the assurance of their love and sympathy and belief in her honesty would go far towards that end.

Mr. Davenant meant to probe the business to the very bottom, and from Textile Row he bent his steps to the crescent where the Bilters resided.

To the minister's surprise he found that Mrs.

Bilter was ignorant of the matter. She knew that Maud possessed a Kruger shilling, which only a little over a week ago had been presented to her by a cousin; but she knew nothing of her daughter's charge against Belle Farleigh, a fact which Mr. Davenant considered carried at least some elements of suspicion. It seemed so unlikely that the girl could so quickly forget the incident. Unfortunately Maud was out, and as detailed discussion with her mother could lead to no tangible result, he decided to postpone further investigation until the morrow.

But just as the clergyman was bidding Mrs. Bilter 'good-night,' Maud arrived upon the scene. She was accompanied by Polly Slater, which would thus obviate a visit to her house, which had been the next step in the clergyman's programme.

Two minutes later Maud was glibly retailing her loss, and how Polly, quite accidentally, was able to bring the charge home to Belle Farleigh. The girl related her story with an unmistakably malicious relish; but Mr. Davenant thought he detected in Polly an air of marked discomfort. He asked various questions, each of which received unhesitating replies from one or both of the girls, although on the whole Maud monopolized the answers.

'May I see the coin?' asked the Vicar.

Maud instantly put her hand into her pocket, only to withdraw it with a startled expression in her face.

'I've—I've lost it,' she said quaveringly. 'I had it when I went out. It was in my purse.'

'Has the purse gone?' inquired Mrs. Bilter. 'What else was in it? Not much, I hope?'

'Only threepence,' replied the girl, with what approached a wail.

'Well,' said her mother, 'somebody'll pick it up, and most likely we'll get it back again. It isn't worth while making a moan over threepence; and the old Kruger thing has caused enough trouble, I should think.'

But Maud was evidently of a different opinion. It was nothing less than positive fear that shone in her eyes, as she literally dragged Polly out of the house to commence a quest for the missing purse.

On his way home Mr. Davenant was very thoughtful. Three points in particular were claiming his attention. Why had not Maud informed her mother of the theft and its detection; why was Polly Slater so obviously ill at ease; and why was Maud almost distracted at what was but a trifling loss?

Was it fate or justice that put the answer into his hands only an hour after he reached home?

'Young man to see you, sir,' announced a servant.

'Half an hour ago, sir,' said the visitor, 'I picked up this purse outside the market hall. There is a ticket in it for your Sunday-school concert, and I thought you would be the most likely to find the owner.'

'I am exceedingly obliged to you,' responded the clergyman. 'Strangely enough, I expect I know to whom it belongs.' He was opening it as he spoke. Its contents seemed to give him a shock. His face appeared to indicate mingled surprise, satisfaction, sorrow, and relief.

'Yes,' he said, 'this is the purse.' And again he expressed his thanks as he escorted the young man to the door.

The minister re-entered his study and shook his head very solemnly, as once more he viewed the contents of the little purse. He slipped it into his pocket as he went into the hall, where he took up his hat, and again passed out into the street.

When he returned home it was quite ten o'clock; but that did not prevent him sitting down to write a couple of brief notes, which he handed to the servant with instructions to have them delivered immediately by hand.

One of the notes caused intense satisfaction at number sixteen, Textile Row. It was short but amazingly sweet. It ran—

I trust Belle will be sufficiently well to attend school in the morning that I may publicly clear her from the least shred of suspicion.

The other one was addressed to the Bilters, where its contents created nothing short of consternation.

Maud would certainly not be at school in the morning; and Mrs. Bilter advised that young lady to seek the seclusion of her bedroom before her father came in, unless she wished 'to be half-murdered.'

CHAPTER XIII

BUNKED WI' TH' BRASS

ALTHOUGH the three Farleighs felt better for the visit of the minister, they remained none the less concerned for Belle. When she awoke she was quite light-headed; and Mrs. Evans hurried off to a local chemist for a soporific draught to encourage a further spell of less troubled slumber.

When Mr. Davenant's note arrived, the girl was soundly asleep; and Mary quite rightly judged that in all probability she would awake in a more tranquil state of mind.

Charlie and Tom retired to rest, but not so Mary. She had made a fire in the bedroom, and she intended to sit up until the sleeping mixture had performed its beneficent task.

It was not until long after midnight that Belle opened her eyes. It was only for a moment; but it was quite sufficient for the elder girl to be assured that her sister had recovered her mental balance. In all probability Belle was endeavouring to realize what had befallen her. It was a critical moment,

for it was not at all unlikely that unkind recollection would swoop down upon her and again chase her to the verge of distraction.

Mary considered for a moment, revolving in her mind what was the course of action that best promised success. She came to the decision that there was no virtue in delay.

'Belle,' she whispered.

There was a flicker of the girl's eyelids—no other sign that she realized her sister had spoken to her. She doubtless feared that Mary was waiting to indulge in a cross-examination.

'Belle!' she repeated. 'Belle! they've found out the real thief.'

There was no room for doubt whether the words had reached her ears; it was positive that they had penetrated her consciousness. Belle sprang up in bed, weak and trembling, but nevertheless wildly desirous to learn particulars of the good news.

Mary seized the opportunity offered to her. She did not wish her sister to relapse into hysteria, and she brought firmness and decision to aid her in staving it off.

'Listen to me, Belle,' she said, almost brusquely. 'Your trouble is all over—all over, dear. Mr. Davenant has found out who stole the coin—if one was stolen. At any rate, whatever it was, you are out of it completely.' Belle lay perfectly still. Probably she did not immediately recognize the

fullest import of her sister's announcement. Mary continued—

'To-morrow morning you will go to school to hear the minister tell the girls that it was all a mistake so far as you were concerned. He will say you are innocent. Innocent! Do you hear? Everybody will hear him say it; everybody will believe it.' And then with her cheek against her sister's, she added—

'Now forget all about it, dear. Go to sleep. Go to sleep,' she concluded, 'or I shall be angry.'

Even as she kissed her, Belle gave a deep sigh of contentment and closed her eyes, to carry out the elder girl's bidding.

And then Mary sank upon her knees to resume with added fervour her thanks to God, which Tom's warning shout had interrupted hours and hours ago.

Tired out by the stress and strain she had undergone, Mary hastily undressed, and crept into bed. She listened attentively for a moment to her sister's regular breathing, and then with a nod of satisfaction blew out the light.

The next morning Belle exhibited such traces of the ordeal through which she had passed that in the ordinary course she was quite obviously unfit to attend school. Mary decided to accompany her, and when she had been vindicated in the eyes of her schoolmates she could return home to spend a quiet day in recuperation.

When the scholars marched into school they immediately gathered some important business was afoot. It was very seldom that the minister visited the school so early, and the fact that Mary Farleigh and Belle occupied chairs close by Miss Brightwell's desk was certainly something out of the common. That neither Maud Bilter nor Polly Slater was present did not escape attention, and gave an added zest to the general speculation of the wondering scholars.

Prayers were taken by the clergyman, at the conclusion of which he mounted the desk, and commenced to speak in quiet, measured tones, not a word of which was missed by the eagerly listening girls.

He reminded them of the untoward event of the previous afternoon, when Belle Farleigh had, it was believed, failed to confute a grievous accusation. The girl having been publicly humiliated, it was but common justice that the same publicity should be given to her acquittal of even the merest suggestion of wrong-doing.

Mr. Davenant made it plain that while it afforded him pleasure to clear Belle, he was correspondingly pained to have to convict two other scholars of most despicable conduct.

The girls, and no less the head mistress and the other members of the staff, were amazed as he unfolded the ingenious plot which Maud Bilter had

conceived for the undoing of Belle ; and which would have remained undiscovered had the lost purse been returned direct to Maud instead of falling into his hands.

Maud Bilter possessed two Kruger shillings, one of which she threw down on the path in the recreation ground, where in all probability it would be found by Belle, whom she could even then see coming in her direction.

Just as she expected, Belle espied the coin, which she picked up and transferred to her pocket after cursorily examining it. She quite thought it was but a metal token of little or no value, and promptly forgot all about it until Maud developed her plot still further.

Polly Slater up to a certain point was the innocent tool in Maud's cleverly conceived scheme. She did handle a Kruger shilling ; she did take a tinfoil impression of it ; but not of the one of which Belle had become possessed. It was not until the two girls went for a walk at night that Maud disclosed to her friend the means she had taken to bring disgrace upon Belle ; and that was where Polly's complicity began. She ought to have avowed her knowledge to the minister when she saw him at Bilters'. She allowed that opportunity to pass ; but after the recovery of the purse she promptly made confession as soon as Mr. Davenant paid her a visit at her own home.

The scholars were so silent during the Vicar's explanation that several times he doubted whether he was making the matter quite clear. But when he had concluded, their ringing cheers showed him that the vindication of Belle needed not another word. They realized that she had been the victim of an atrocious plot, which had recoiled upon the head of the girl who had conceived it.

Mary Farleigh was quite satisfied with the cheering tribute to the popularity of her sister; and the sympathy and open satisfaction of her schoolmates did something to atone to Belle for the misery she had endured.

Polly Slater returned to school in the afternoon, and as at first she had been more sinned against than sinning, she might regain the regard of her friends. Maud Bilter would not return to Loombridge Road; she transferred herself to another school at the far side of the town. The Bilters announced that they had long contemplated the removal of Maud to a school that offered better educational advantages. It was not until quite a week later that they discovered that the change of school necessitated the forfeiture of the right to compete for the special scholarship for which Maud was being privately coached. John Bilter's feelings when this information was conveyed to him can be better imagined than described; but the hands at the Alabama knew what was the effect upon his temper.

For more than a week there was not the merest cloud to mar the sunshine in which the Farleighs basked. Charlie was happier than he had ever been in his life; Tom's new berth amply bore out its fair promise; Belle had recovered her spirits, and school lost nothing in pleasantness because of the absence of Maud Bilter; and Mary went about her household duties as blithesome as a bird, especially in making her preparations for Christmastide.

Charlie did not go to Manchester on Saturdays. It was a free day upon which he could visit the Alabama Mill to collect the men's payments into the sick and dividend club.

Christmas this year fell upon Saturday. Immediately Charlie had taken the last Saturday's subscriptions he totalled up the year's payments, in and out, and ascertained the amounts standing to the credit of the members. He presented the figures to Mr. Jarrocks for comparison with the post-office bank-book; and the manager complimented the secretary upon the fact that the amount was correct to a penny. He undertook to forward the notice of withdrawal, and arranged for Charlie to call at his office on Tuesday night for the warrant that would enable them to obtain the money from the post office.

Charlie was quite pleased at the attitude of Mr. Jarrocks, who seemed to have forgotten their unpleasant interview of a fortnight ago.

On Tuesday night he presented himself at the manager's office at the appointed time, six o'clock. The distribution of the funds would take place at nine o'clock in the timekeeper's office just within the mill-gates.

'You'll find the bank-book and the warrant in that envelope on the mantelshelf,' said Mr. Jarrocks. 'I'll be ready to go with you as soon as I've finished this last letter.'

While he was waiting, Charlie took out the voucher.

'Why, Mr. Jarrocks, you've had it made payable at Loombridge,' he cried, 'instead of Spindleton.'

'Never!' replied the manager, incredulously, snatching the paper out of his hand. 'So I have,' he acknowledged, in tones that were both vexed and wondering. 'I wonder how I came to make such a mistake. It's awkward, too,' he added. 'I've got an important engagement in half an hour, and I can't possibly go the three miles to Loombridge. We must postpone the share-out until to-morrow.'

'That will never do, sir,' replied Charlie. 'Some of the men would think there was something wrong.'

'Perhaps you're right,' agreed Mr. Jarrocks. 'I could kick myself for the mistake. I was writing several letters to Loombridge on Saturday night, when I sent off the notice. That's how it came about, I suppose.'

He considered for a moment.

'I see no help for it but for you to go yourself,' said he. 'You can get over the ground quickly, and it won't take you long.'

'I'll get one of the men to go with me,' answered Charlie.

Mr. Jarrocks made a deprecating gesture.

'I'd tell nobody and take nobody,' he said. 'It's best not to let it be known you are carrying money about; and nobody will dream of you fetching it from Loombridge.'

Charlie nodded his head.

'All right,' he replied. 'I'll set off at once.'

'In coming back, stick to the main road all the way. At any rate don't take the short cut across the fields,' advised the manager. Then he added, 'When you come to Rough Hills you might risk that bit; it's dry and good going and will save you half a mile. Yes, do that, and I'll come that way to meet you as soon as I've finished my business.'

A minute later Charlie was passing out of the mill gates, with the bank-book buttoned up in the inside pocket of his coat. A neighbouring clock was just chiming half-past six.

It was quite three hours later when a man gave a hurried knock on the door of number sixteen, Textile Row. It was Mary who answered it.

'Is't Charlie at whoam?' inquired the man breathlessly.

'No,' said she. 'He is at the club settlement. They're dividing up to-night, you know.'

'Yo' cawnt be reet,' Clem Smith replied. 'He inna theer. Aw knaws thet f'r a fac'. Aw've juist cum frae theer. Bill Jorrucks sent 'im tew th' poast office at awf a pawst six, an' nob'dy sin 'im sence then.' He hesitated a moment and then added: 'Th' chaaps are in a rare wack abeawt it. Aw doan't loike tew think it mysel', but some on 'em saay he's done a bunk wi' th' brass.'

CHAPTER XIV

SUSPICION

CLEM SMITH found himself wishing that some other member of the club had been deputed to undertake this unpleasant errand. He was on rather good terms with Charlie, and considered that he had expressed himself with much consideration for the feelings of his sister. He did not approve of the way in which she turned upon him in interruption.

'They think Charlie has stolen the money?' she demanded incredulously. There was an element of scorn in her tone that rather nettled the messenger.

'Aw dunna saay it mysel', Aw towd tha'. It's noa yuse cuttin' oop rough wi' me,' he continued; 'bud t' brass inna theer an' noabry knaws wheer Chawlie's gotten tew. Sum on t' chaaps wor talkin' o' callin' in t' p'lice. Summat's wrung; onybody knaws thet's sartain.'

The money was the last thing that Mary was thinking about. The disappearance of her brother was what troubled her; but the mention of the police jerked into her consciousness the fact that

other people's minds would be more concerned with the club funds. It caused her not the slightest perturbation. They must find Charlie, and it followed that the money would then be available for distribution.

'Charlie must have met with an accident,' said Mary, with a sob in her throat. 'He may be lying in the hospital, or——'

'Lewk yo!' Smith answered. 'Doan't yo' think it. 'Tis noa good siking an' gessin' ower it. If he's in t'ospittle sumbry wod knaw 'bout it. Aw'm fair capt, bud a lot o' bletherskitin' woant mend th' lumber.'

Mary was reaching a shawl that was hanging at the back of the door.

'Wor 'ull yo' dew?' Clem inquired.

'I'm going to the mill to see Mr. Jarrocks,' she replied. 'Perhaps he'll be able to suggest——'

'He conna tell yo' anythin' abaat it, cos he inna theer,' said Smith. 'He's had tew goo to Manch'ster. He wunna coom back afore th' morn.'

The girl shook her head despairingly.

'Happen yo' 'ull be fair razzored abaat it, bud it's Jack Bilter whot's ageean Chawlie. He wor th' fust tew say owt 'bout th' p'lice. Bud doan't yo' grieve abaat it,' he added soothingly.

It was now anger more than grief that shone in Mary's eyes. Into her mind flashed the idea that the overseer was at the bottom of the trouble. She

braced herself up to face him, and charge him with conspiring to ruin her brother's good name.

'I'm not afraid of Mr. Bilter,' she replied. 'He will have to prove his words. Perhaps I shall be the first to seek the aid of the police.'

'Thet's better nor greetin' an' shrikin',' said Clem. 'Bilter's gotten a sooap in 'im, bud fair plaay's fair plaay awl th' warld ower; an' sum on us ull see he doant mak' it harder fo' yo' than theer's need fo'. We'll be pikin' forrad naa.'

They were delayed a minute in setting out by the arrival of Belle and Tom.

'Oh, Mary!' exclaimed the girl. 'It isn't true, is it? It's all over the town that Charlie has run away with the club money.'

'No, dear!' replied the older girl. 'It's a mistake—it's a lie. Go in the house and lock the door; and stay there till I return.'

'I'll come with you,' said Tom.

'Yo' dew whot hoo tells yo',' answered Clem Smith. 'Aw'll goo wi' her, an' Aw'll bring her back to th' haase ageean.'

As Mary and her companion hurried along the streets no word was spoken between them. Each was busy with thoughts in which there was no room for speech. When they arrived at the mill they found a crowd gathered around the entrance, through which man and girl forced their way to the little wicket in the big doors. Within the covered

gateway stood the members of the club. Some of them greeted Mary with lowering looks; others appeared to be reserving their judgement; and only a few were frankly sympathetic.

Mary paid no heed to the looks, friendly or otherwise. Her mind was wholly occupied with the two figures standing on the steps of the timekeeper's office—one was John Bilter and the other was—she shuddered from head to foot—a policeman.

The overseer did not appear to be angry; the situation afforded him a pleasure which he was unable to conceal. He simply gloated over Mary, when she appeared before him.

'Good evenin' Miss Farleigh,' he said with an assumption of amiability that did not deceive the girl. 'Yo've brought your pigs to a fine market—at least your brother has. Have you brought him wi' you? Leastways have you brought th' brass? That's what we want.'

Mary looked around her like a hunted animal. She could not for a moment answer the terribly direct questions. Her mind was searching for a means to temporize—some method of gaining time. The cold questioning gaze of the policeman, however, was not conducive to collectedness.

'I came to see what you could tell me about him,' she said at length, weakly. She addressed herself to anybody but Bilter.

Now any such attitude on the part of Mary was

distinctly displeasing to the half-intoxicated bully. He intended taking the most extreme measures against the missing secretary presently ; but he did not wish to lose a moment's pleasure which the torturing of Mary would afford his malevolent disposition.

'Confaand yo', yo' better pay 'tention tew me,' he cried wrathfully. 'Theer's noa gettin' aat o' it. Aw'm th' mon tew lewk tew in this yeer boggle. Aw'm noan a fule tew be played wi' by a thief's sister.'

Mary shrank as though he had laid a whip upon her quivering flesh. Some of the men were sorry for her in the predicament in which she found herself placed ; but Clem Smith was the only one who voiced his sympathy.

'Doant be a gormed fule,' he advised Bilter. 'Brekkin' th' gel's hert woant put us ony moar forrad. If Chawlie Farleigh's a bad bobbin, top bottom an' middle on 'im, it's noa her fau't. Aw hardings knaw what tew think 'bout him.'

'Yo' big, sawft, gauky,' replied Bilter, 'yo' keep yo're tungue atween yore teeth. Yo've lost tha wits. Aw'm not feart tew say whot Aw thinks. Aw'm straight tew th' police station tew tell 'em theer, an' tew tek out a warrant.' He nodded towards Mary. 'Hoo says hoo coom tew ask 'bout him. Hoo won't mak a fule o' me. Aw'm f'r th' police pratty quick, an' th' owd boggart hissel' woant stop me.'

'Stiddy on!' exclaimed Clem. 'Yo're noan th' committee, tha knaws. Th' p'lice woant tek ony orders fra juist onybody. It's a committee job, thet's sartain.' He noticed that the policeman nodded to Bilter in confirmation of the objection. 'Tellin's knawin', and Aw's towd yo',' concluded Smith, with an emphatic nod.

Bilter looked daggers at Smith. It was an unwelcome reminder that his position as overseer carried no additional weight outside mill hours; and on the club committee he possessed but one vote, the same as any ordinary member.

'Th' committee's heer,' rejoined Bilter. 'We'st ha' a meetin' in noa time as yo'me soa pertickler.'

'Aw dunna 'gree wi' yo,' objected Clem. 'In a matter o' this soart we conna be ower keerful. Noabry knaws wheer it ull end when th' p'lice is in't. Aw'm f'r waitin' till Mestur Jorrucks is back. He's th' treasurer, an' noa p'lice ull move a finger till he's had a saay in it.'

Mary's eyes sought the faces of the men, and she was comforted not a little to find that the majority evidently agreed with the last speaker.

Jack Bilter commenced to argue, but finding that he made little or no impression, he ended by roundly cursing them for not falling in with his views.

Thus encouraged, Mary now found her voice. She laid her hand upon Clem Smith's arm entreatingly.

'Oh! please help me to find Charlie,' she cried. 'Never mind the money. The club will not lose a penny; I will see that every member receives his share to-morrow.'

'Fine words butter noa parsnips, missis,' sneered Bilter. 'To-morrow nivver cooms, an' th' brass winna coom, onless th' police cotches him afore he's blewed it oop.'

'I give you my word of honour that every member shall be paid to-morrow,' reaffirmed Mary, with a glance around her that included everybody except Bilter.

Ned Gorman now spoke for the first time. He had been standing in the background, and Mary had but just perceived that he was present.

'Best thing is to leeve it a-be to-neet,' he said. 'Aw knaws Chawlie a sight bettern moast on tha. Aw conna mek mysel' believe he's a thief. Theer's summat we doant understan'.'

'Oh, thank you, Mr. Gorman!' exclaimed Mary. 'We must find Charlie, and he will be sure to have a satisfactory explanation.' She broke down at that point and commenced quietly to sob.

'Huish, Mary!' said Gorman. 'Doant put yo'-sel' abaat. We woan' be lung afore we foind 'im. Sumbry shall goo t'ospital, an' Aw'll goo tew th' police station. We'n foind 'im somewheer, Aw'se sartain.'

Mary was too full to express her thanks in words: but her gratitude shone in her eyes.

'I'll go now,' she said. 'I must call and tell Mr. Davenant. Perhaps he will be able to give me some advice.'

Ten minutes later she was relating to the minister and his wife the strange disappearance of Charlie, to which the missing club money gave an unavoidably sinister feature.

Mr. Davenant sat listening with thoughtful lines in his brow. The matter certainly bore an ugly aspect. Charlie Farleigh's life apparently was as transparent as daylight; he practically had no companions; and he had never given evidence of a single extravagant taste. He certainly had a small loft of homing pigeons, but he never entered them in any matches, and consequently was not likely to have lost money by betting. Then struck his mind the thought that young Farleigh might have been led into bad courses in Manchester, where a great portion of his time was now spent. It was no use saying Charlie could not have fallen; the clergyman had met with too many cases similarly distressing in character. All the same he could not bring himself to assume his guilt; he thought it far more probable that he had met with some mishap or had been afflicted with sudden loss of memory. But of all this he said no word to the tearful girl, who sought his advice, except upon the last two points.

'I've promised to make good the money,' Mary informed him. 'The members must not suffer or they will be certain to take police proceedings.'

'But can you refund £30?' asked the minister. 'It is a large sum.'

'We've got a little more than that in the post-office savings bank,' she replied. 'It was all mother left us, and we were keeping it to send Belle to college.'

'But, my dear!' urged Mrs. Davenant. 'Suppose your brother has been assaulted and robbed, you would not be called upon to pay back the money. I know it is painful to consider such a possibility, but we must look the matter squarely in the face.'

The clergyman nodded agreement with his wife.

'I've promised,' said Mary. 'If it turn out unnecessary to forfeit any money, so much the better. I shall ask Mr. Jarrocks to pay out the dividends, and to take my bank-book until the money can be withdrawn.'

Mr. Davenant was thinking deeply. He looked across at Mary wonderingly.

'Has Charlie got any enemies?' he asked suddenly. 'I know there has been some unpleasantness at the mill,' he added.

'He hasn't an enemy in the world,' affirmed Mary. 'Not a real enemy. Bilter is no friend, of course, but——'

'And Mr. Jarrocks?' asked the minister.

'He has been very nice with Charlie since he left the mill,' she replied. 'He offered to reinstate him, but my brother wouldn't go back.'

The clergyman did not answer for a moment. He had stepped over to a safe in a corner of his study. He took from it a bag in which coins chinked.

'I'll lend you the money myself,' he said, as he began to count out thirty pounds in gold. 'You can bring me the bank-book in the morning.'

Mary commenced to express her thanks, but Mr. Davenant waved them aside.

'Pay Mr. Jarrocks the money and take a receipt on account of Charlie—in fact as though Charlie were paying it personally.'

'Write out a receipt yourself,' suggested Mrs. Davenant. 'Jarrocks will then only need to affix his signature.'

For answer Mr. Davenant drew a half sheet of notepaper before him. He wrote out a short form of receipt, and even affixed to it a stamp.

'But what can I do to find Charlie?' asked Mary. 'The suspense, the suspicion of everybody, are terrible. I shall go crazy if nothing can be done to discover him.'

'I think you may trust Ned Gorman to do everything that is possible at present,' replied the minister. 'You must be patient. All you can do is to wait and hope—and pray.'

Suiting his action to his words the clergyman knelt there and then, and voiced a supplication to God to watch over and guard the absent one, and restore him safely to those who loved him.

When they arose from their knees Mary felt inexpressibly comforted. It was good to have two staunch friends at her elbow; and it was better still to lay her trouble before the great Father, who alone can bring balm to suffering spirits.

'Now you had better hasten home, Mary,' said the clergyman. 'I will come with you. It may be that news has already arrived.'

It took but a few minutes to reach Textile Row. Tom answered Mary's knock.

'Mr Jarrocks is here!' he whispered. 'He has been waiting quite ten minutes. He says he's sorry, and he will soon put it all right.'

They entered the little front room, which was only lighted from the kitchen beyond.

'Leave me here,' whispered Mr. Davenant. 'Do not inform him that I am present.' He pressed Mary's arm reassuringly, as she and Tom passed on. He pushed the door slightly to, after them. He stood in the dark room in a position where he could hear every word that was said.

CHAPTER XV

A SILENT WATCHER

WHEN Mary stepped into the presence of Mr. William Jarrocks her knees were trembling and her heart was beating tumultuously. What did his visit portend? Had he brought news of Charlie, or had he come purely in his capacity as treasurer of the club? She waited in tense anxiety for the man to disclose his purpose.

Mr. Davenant, from his vantage-place in the dark room, was watching the mill manager's face intently. He read something there that subconsciously gave his suspicions a most unpleasant jab. He read intense desire, not the desire of love's sweet possession—but that of almost overpowering greed. Into the clergyman's mind flashed the remembrance of the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers and the inquiries he had made into the history of the Farleighs. Had the young man mentioned the matter to Jarrocks? Had the manager in some way——.

But Jarrocks was speaking. He had risen from his chair to extend his hand to Mary. For a moment it seemed that she would ignore it, but she laid the

tips of her fingers in his fat clasp, which was nothing less than a clumsy caress.

'I've only just heard of your trouble,' he commenced. 'I was called to Manchester and left Jack Bilter to take charge of things. I came along to see you the minute I was told what had happened.'

Mr. Davenant was just debating with himself whether he should disclose his presence. There were questions upon the tip of his tongue to which he would like the manager's answers. His purpose was arrested by the action of Mary. Suddenly she stiffened into a cool collectedness. From her hot, dry lips she launched an inquiry :

'I suppose there is no doubt that Charlie had the club money in his possession ? '

Mr. Jarrocks shrugged his shoulders and made a sweeping motion with his hands.

'I handed him the bank-book and the withdrawal warrant about half-past six ; and since then I haven't set eyes on him.'

'Did he go to the post office and withdraw the money ? '

'Good heavens ! I don't know what he did,' replied Jarrocks. 'They told me Charlie had disappeared with the money, and I took it for granted that they knew what they were talking about. Bilter wanted me to put the police on his track, but—but——'

He looked at Mary pointedly, but she said no

word to help him out. He glanced deprecatingly at Tom and Belle and then again at Mary fixedly. It was a plain intimation that he did not desire the presence of the younger members of the family.

Mary read his thoughts. Her eyes sought the door of the darkened little parlour. The remembrance of who was on the other side of it prompted her decision to meet the manager's wishes. She motioned her brother and sister to retire upstairs, and closed the door behind them the moment they had disappeared.

Mr. Jarrocks nodded approvingly.

'That's better,' he said. 'Now we can talk quite comfortably, and I can say straight out what I've come for.'

Mary had sunk into a chair, towards which he drew his own until they were separated by less than an arm's length.

'Let me put this lumber right,' he commenced. 'It's as easy as *that*.' He made a click with his finger and thumb.

Mary was looking straight into the man's eyes, but she did not assist him by exhibiting the slightest comprehension of his meaning.

He edged his chair still closer to her. He lowered his voice.

'Not long ago, I asked you to be my wife. Perhaps I frightened you by speaking too soon; maybe you had got somebody else in your eye. I didn't

intend speaking again for a long time; but now you're in trouble I can't keep it in any longer.'

The attitude of the girl reminded Mr. Davenant of nothing so much as a bird fascinated by the glittering eyes of a snake.

'When I spoke before, I meant it—meant it every word. Now you're up to your eyes in lumber, I make you the offer again. Let us make a match of it. I'll pay the money, and we shall get Charlie back in no time.'

Jarrocks recoiled from the look that had entered Mary's eyes. She was about to speak; but he motioned her to allow him to continue.

'I told you before of all I could offer you to make you one of the biggest pots in Spindleton. Leave me out of it for a minute, Think of Charlie. If the matter is put in the hands of the police they'll commence to hunt him from pillar to post like a mad dog. Think of him in jail. Think of the disgrace. It isn't everybody who'd make you the offer I'm doing.'

It needed all the girl's self-control to prevent her screaming out an indignant refusal; but second thoughts came to her aid. Jarrocks noticed a supplicating glance she cast towards the parlour. He took it as but a desire to escape from him; he little guessed the strength that silent watcher brought to her tortured mind. She was steeling herself to suffer still more, that this unprincipled

blackguard might show himself in his true colours to the hidden witness only a few feet away.

'Suppose—suppose—I consent,' said Mary.

'I want more than consent,' broke in Jarrocks. The knot must be tied. I can get a licence, and the moment you are mine Charlie is free. Free from suspicion, I mean,' he added.

Mary's nod was of comprehension only, but the man took it for consent.

'I've got the licence ready,' he blurted out. 'We can be married to-morrow, we——'

There was a hasty knocking at the back door. The newcomer did not wait to be answered. He opened it himself, stepped across the scullery, and into the presence of Mary and Mr. Jarrocks.

It was Clem Smith who had so unceremoniously broken in upon them. The exclamation which escaped Jarrocks could not be construed into one of welcome; but the newcomer ignored the half snarl, half curse with which he was greeted.

'Yo' heer?' he exclaimed. 'Well, Awse fair boggled. Yo're juist th' mon we want.'

Jarrocks stood up. There was an angry gleam in his eyes. Said he—

'Miss Farleigh and I are having a little private conversation. Please go away and come back in five minutes' time. You must wait.'

'Bud it wo' wait,' was Clem's reply. 'Theer's summat wrang, an' yo're th' on'y mon whot can

bring dayloight tew it. Heer, lissen tew me. Chawlie's drawed noa brass f'm th' poast offis. It wor shet oop, bud Aw woodna goo awaay fr'm th' baak dore till th' poast mestur cummed tew see whot Aw wanted.'

The manager made an effort to prevent any further explanation, but Clem doggedly proceeded—

'He wudna gie me ony anser at fust till Aw telled 'im whot th' trubble wor abeawt. Then he went in tew luke at 'is bukes. He ses theer's noa brass coom f'r th' club, an' noabry's drawed ony out. Theer, then, wor ull yo dew neaw?'

'Then Charlie cannot possibly be a thief,' cried Mary, quite joyfully.

'He's stole noa brass, thet's sartain; an' if soa be he's stole hissel' thet's 'is bizness. It's a pratty foine thing if a yung felley ca' goo away f'r tew-three hours if e' loikes.'

'You're talking of something you know nothing about,' replied Jarrocks. 'You've inquired at the wrong office. The money was payable at Loombridge.'

'At Loombridge?'

Mary and Clem's inquiry was a joint one.

The manager nodded sullenly.

'I'd forgotten it until Smith reminded me,' he explained, turning towards Mary.

But the girl's mind was working rapidly. 'He

might have come back across the fields and Rough Hills,' she said. 'He may have been robbed or he may have fallen—fallen——" Her voice trailed off.

'Theer's a lot o' they owd shafts on'y 'alf fenced in,' said Clem in a low voice. 'Gud Lord! Ef we'd on'y knawd we cud ha' sarched f'r 'im.'

There was silence for a moment.

'As sune as Aw'd sin th' poast mestur,' resumed Smith, 'Aw found Jack Bilter an' towd 'im abeawt it. He sed nawthin' cud be dun till yo' coomed baak fr'm Manch'ster.'

'But,' interrupted Mary, 'Mr. Jarrocks told me he had just seen Mr. Bilter, who urged him to put the police on Charlie's track. Those are your own words,' she added, as she faced round to the manager.

'I think you must have misunderstood me,' maintained Jarrocks. 'I was only repeating what others told me.'

'Worra we gooin' tew dew?' asked Clem Smith. 'Rough Hills is a boggley soart o' plaace to prawl abeawt o' neets. Bud we mun dew summat.'

Mary's mind was completely in a whirl. The situation was now robbed of its blackest feature. If it had been generally known that her brother had been obliged to go to Loombridge, it was doubtful if there would have arisen any suspicion of Charlie's integrity. To fetch the money from only as far as Spindleton's main street was one thing; it was another to traverse the fields, and then a desolated

tract of spoil heaps, that remained to mark the time when the town was concerned more with coal than with cotton. For many years the coalfield had lain idle. Only within the last few months had a few of the old workings been reopened owing to a rise in the price of coal, which made it worth while to obtain poor quality fuel, that in more prosperous times it had not paid to bring to the surface. The old engine-houses were dismantled long ago, or else the machinery had rusted past all recovery. New operations were carried on by means of simple gin winding drums worked by horses, or even by hand. Some of the old shafts were bricked over; still more were but railed in, and the decaying woodwork did not in many cases offer much protection to pedestrians in the dark. Those shafts that were still worked were usually marked at night by a fire, by the light of which was brought to the surface the product of the labour of the night shift.

'Aw mun be orf,' Clem Smith continued. 'Aw'll git sum on aar chaps tew goo tew Rough Hills wi' lanterns an' torchers. We con dew nowt tan-tattlin' heer. Worra yo' saay, Mestur Jorrucks?' he asked in conclusion.

But for a moment the manager did not appear to have any suggestion to make. He was filled with fury—the more so because he had to repress it. If Smith had not come blathering in at so inopportune a moment he would have gained the promise

of Mary's hand in marriage. Now there was no telling what course of action the girl might not adopt. Under no circumstances did he take kindly to defeat, and in this case his inclination, and still more his interests, urged him to hold on to his objective. He was seeking for some vulnerable point in the girl's armour upon which to direct a fresh attack.

'We have got to find Charlie,' he said at length. 'That goes without saying. What troubles me at the moment is the money.'

'Nivver heed th' brass,' replied Clem. 'Thet ull hev tew bide a bit.'

'That's all very well,' said Jarrocks. 'You're a single man and can perhaps afford to wait. Some of the members are looking to the dividend to provide the Christmas dinner. They won't——'

Mary put her hand in her pocket. She withdrew a little packet and dropped it upon the table.

'There is the money, Mr. Jarrocks,' she said. 'Nobody will go short of their dinner because of Charlie.'

The manager looked at the packet and then back again at Mary. He said never a word, but waited for her to proceed. Clem Smith also looked at her narrowly; but seeing that she made no attempt to enlighten them, his curiosity overmastered him. He seized the packet, and commenced to unwrap it.

'By gum!' he exclaimed. 'Gowden sovrins! Heer, sumbry gie me a kick, wull yo'. It's enuff tew skeer a mon. Awse gooin' daft.'

Jarrocks, although he did not give vent to his feelings, was no less astonished. He, too, appeared to doubt his own eyesight.

'Where did you get the money?' he asked.

'It is Charlie's,' replied Mary. 'He—gave—it—to—me.'

The change that overcame the manager was startling. He went red and white in turn, and then a livid, sickly hue settled upon his features. He appeared to be fighting for his breath.

'But—but—he—couldn't—he——'

He stopped short. The looks which the man and girl shot at him recalled him to his self-possession. Breathing heavily, he stood staring at Mary. There was an evil glitter in his eye.

'I don't understand,' he said. 'Is this a trick? If Charlie gave you the money, where is he?'

The question flicked the girl into acute remembrance of her trouble. Charlie had indeed given her thirty pounds immediately after their mother's death. What put it into her mind so to express herself she could not tell, but in view of the effect it had produced she looked upon it as a happy inspiration. The momentary fear that had entered the face of Jarrocks opened her mind to a possibility that frightened, nay, staggered her. It was

however, too intangible to follow up at that moment.

'Where is he?' she repeated. 'That is what I want to know.'

Jarrocks was visibly relieved. He could not fathom the new turn matters were taking. It was a puzzling situation, but it was not the catastrophe that for a moment he had feared. He decided to play his trump card. Clem Smith was present, but that could not be helped.

'I shall refuse to touch the money,' he announced. 'I might be compounding a—felony. I fear the police will have to be called in after all.' He was looking directly at Mary. 'The offer I made before we were interrupted holds good for another half minute. Failing your consent there will remain no course open to me but to put the matter in the hands of the police.'

Smith looked from one to the other wonderingly. There was that in the manager's tone, and in Mary's face, which he failed to understand. He was about to ask what it all meant, when there came an unexpected interruption.

The Rev. Ambrose Davenant had come to the conclusion that it was time for him to intervene. He had not failed to notice the momentary fear exhibited by the mill manager. Like Mary, he could not assess its full significance, but he considered the moment opportune for revealing himself.

'You are quite right, Mr. Jarrocks,' he said, as he stepped into the kitchen. 'The police will have to be informed. I shall make it my business to go straight to the police office to report it.'

CHAPTER XVI

TRAPPED IN THE MINE

ON his way to Loombridge Charlie Farleigh's mind several times reverted to the palpably weak explanation Mr. Jarrocks had given, concerning his mistake in the name of the office at which the bank withdrawal was to be effected. Personally he was not the least bit inconvenienced. In his pocket he carried a homing pigeon which some weeks ago, he had sold to a man at Loombridge. To-day, for the second time, the bird had returned to his old home and Charlie had intended sending him back by a railway guard, a brother of the pigeon's new owner. Now that he had of necessity to go to Loombridge, he could deliver the bird personally.

Before he came out of the post office the club secretary safely buttoned up the money in his hip pocket. He then made his way to the house where he desired to leave the pigeon, only to find it in darkness—nobody at home. He could not wait indefinitely for the return of some members of the family, and he did not care to leave the bird with any of the neighbours. He decided to take him back to Spindleton.

Charlie felt tempted to leave the main road and take the short cut across the fields ; but his natural caution urged him to run no undue risk. He kept steadily on his way until he came to the edge of Rough Hills, upon the far side of which he could discern the lights of Spindleton. At wide intervals, here and there, were dotted fires, that marked the coal shafts where work was still primitively carried on. He felt his hip pocket, and as he looked across the black expanse almost decided to keep to the main road, notwithstanding the detour it would necessitate.

He remembered that the manager had said he would come to meet him over Rough Hills. Although he thought it highly improbable that Mr. Jarrocks would do anything of the kind, he reflected that he had better not run the risk of missing him.

The track was a winding one, but it was wide and well beaten, and he was acquainted with the neighbourhood too well to fear that he would come to grief in any of the many holes lying just off the path all around him. There were no uncovered old shafts anywhere near the route.

It was darker among the pit mounds than upon the main road, or Charlie thought it was. It was not pitch black, but there was not sufficient light to enable him to perceive a rope that was stretched out before his unsuspecting feet, which were suddenly whisked from under him.

In the moment that he fell heavily to the ground Charlie recognized that it was no accident ; the rope around his ankles told him there was afoot a scheme to rob him. Some miscreants had become aware of his errand to Loombridge, and had been fired with the desperate resolve to relieve him of the money he was carrying.

Charlie would have fought for his own sake, but as the custodian of the club funds he would offer a still more dogged opposition. The encircling cord slackened. In a flash he was on his feet aiming a blow at the figure that had loomed up in front of him. He caught his opponent between the eyes with a force that jarred his arm to the elbow.

Thud ! Something almost noiseless, and yet firm and terribly heavy, fell upon the back of his head. The youth, with barely a groan, sank down in a heap.

When Charlie returned to consciousness it was dark—an inky blackness that he could almost feel ; it was quiet—a silence that filled him with the dread of he knew not what ; the air was damp and cold—a clammy atmosphere that might be that of the grave.

He lay quite still for a few moments endeavouring to realize what had happened to him. Slowly it all came back—Loombridge—the post office—the attack on Rough Hills. His empty hip pocket was cold logic that was irrefutable.

Robbery ! That was patent enough to his yet

weak understanding. How his temples throbbed! The back of his head seemed to have lost all feeling!

Where was he? In what black, clammy, silent hole was he laid? He was lying upon straw, his fingers told him as much. But even while he propounded these questions to himself he was painfully dragging himself up into a sitting posture.

In his waistcoat pocket he found a box of matches. He took one out and struck it. The flame showed him that he was in a little wooden hut. His pallet consisted of bundles of straw and a couple of corn sacks. There was a box upon which was an empty bottle and a bunch of tallow dips. The match had died out in less time than it takes to set forth what was exhibited to his wondering eyes. He crawled wearily to the candles and when he had lighted one of them he fixed it in the bottle. He again sought a sitting posture, while he inspected more closely his cribbed and cabined environment.

The passing minutes were bringing added alertness to his newly awakened consciousness. His surroundings, and especially the intense silence, were filling his mind with a nameless fear that he could not combat. He was trembling, but it was not caused altogether by the cold. As he stood up, his legs threatened to give way under him; but his movements were stirring life into his numbed limbs. He put the candle down upon the ground; he flapped his arms, at first slowly but with increasing vigour;

he stamped his feet. He dared scarcely move his head ; its contents appeared to heave tumultuously with the least shake of it.

Painfully he walked round the hut. It was constructed of stout planks with a door that possessed no lock upon the inside, and in any case so strongly secured that it was to all intents and purposes an integral part of the strong wooden wall.

No window ! He looked around in hope that he was mistaken. He was quite unreasonably overjoyed to discover an aperture—a hole about twelve inches square. He walked over to it. It was just level with his face. He peered out into a malignant blackness that was uncanny. He stood still a moment, the while he got a grip of himself. Cold perspiration stood in great beads upon his forehead.

With trembling hand he pushed his bottle candlestick through the square hole and endeavoured to light up the apparently solid gloom. He strained his eyes, seeking to accustom them to their surroundings. Presently he gave a startled gasp. He drew the candle into the hut. He clutched his brow with his hand, while he endeavoured to think. He looked over his shoulder at the hole as though it fascinated him. He groaned, as there gnawed into his consciousness the fact that he was at the bottom of a shaft !

He was caught like a rat in a trap. From light and life and love, he had been wrested by unknown

hands to be immured in the very bowels of the reeking, vaporous earth!

He fell back upon the straw, and again gave himself up to thought. How the silence oppressed him; he could hear the ticking of his watch. He took it out and held it to his ear with childish joy; it was more than a watch; it was a friend, blessed in its sound and movement. He wound it up very carefully.

It was midnight! His thoughts flew to the club meeting. How had his non-appearance affected the members? Would they not take steps to find him? That was a blessed idea. But would they dream of looking for him in the deep hole where he was confined? The doubt robbed the previous thought of almost all its comfort.

There was a flutter in his pocket.

'Coo-o-o! Coo-o-o!'

It seemed almost a heavenly sound. Charlie could scarcely believe his own ears. He had forgotten all about the bird, and even now, in the midst of his delight, he was marvelling how the pigeon had escaped injury. It certainly seemed to suggest that during his unconscious removal from Rough Hills to the mine, he had been treated with almost gentleness.

Very carefully he released the pigeon from his pocket. He smoothed down his ruffled plumage and then he placed him on a ledge above his head. The

bird perched there quite contentedly, while Charlie resumed his melancholy brooding.

'And Mary and Belle and Tom!' continued his whirling thoughts, in silent introspection. What did they think of his disappearance?

Into Charlie's heart gushed a flood of loving thoughts of the gentle, self-reliant sister to whom he owed so much. Belle and Tom occupied his mind chiefly from the point of view of what they jointly owed to 'Mother Mary.'

Backwards and forwards swung the pendulum of his thoughts. Sub-consciously his mind was searching for some clue to the reason of his imprisonment. If robbery were the sole motive, why had this further desperate step been taken? From the footpads' point of view there had been no hitch in relieving him of the money—they had obtained it, too, without affording him the slightest suspicion as to their identity. Why had they not left him where they felled him? Why had——

Oh! How vain were all his imaginings. There remained nothing for him to do but wait to learn the fate marked out for him. The very conclusion did but set his mind groping in darker channels, from out of which sprang still blacker fears to clamp his heart in shuddering horror. He fancied himself passing through the torturing stages of slow starvation. Perchance his brain would give way to rob him of every glimpse of reason or of heaven. It might be

that—in this deep recess, hidden from the world above—he would be done to death, and all vainly would his blood call out for vengeance.

Even while the chaotic depths of his fevered mind boiled up in threat to turn his brain to frenzy, kindly sleep waved her sable wand over his tired frame, his tormented spirit, to bring him peace. His head nodded, his heavy lids closed down. He slept.

When he awoke from his deep slumber Charlie found himself again in darkness. It took him a full minute to collect his thoughts. What had become of his light? Had his captors deprived him of the one solace that would assist him in keeping his reason? The striking of a match revealed to him that his fears were groundless—the candle had but burnt out—and in a very short space a fresh one was comforting him with its tiny beams, the offspring of heaven firstborn. He looked at his watch to learn the time. He had slept for six hours. Suddenly Charlie started in surprise. Food had been placed to his hand. There were bread and cold meat and cheese; there was a miner's tin bottle containing tea. Even before he tasted it his hands assured him that it was quite warm. His jailers did not intend to starve him. There was solid comfort in the knowledge, as there was sustenance in the food and drink placed within his reach.

He commenced there and then to make a meal. His body ached with cold, for he had slept with no

covering beyond his ordinary clothes. The next time he went to sleep he decided he would seek the protection of the rough coverings provided for his use. A draught of the warm tea invigorated him ; he was feeling a new man ; his head did not ache so intolerably ; and his mind was eased of some of the terrors he had previously conjured up.

Then happened something that caused him almost to drop the tin bottle in sudden affright. Through the little hole a voice was addressing him

'Hark yo'! Listen to what I'm tellin' yo'!'

Charlie picked up the candle with which to approach the hole.

'Put that glim down!' commanded the unseen speaker. 'Stand still an' hark to me.'

Charlie was listening with all his ears. He was seeking to learn whether he had heard the voice before. He did not recognize it, but he noticed the speech quite lacked the Lancashire intonation.

'I've brought yo' some tommy, but I ain't comin' down to bring no more. It'll come down the shaft on a string. Here's a hook. Yo' must grope about till yo' find the string, an' then yo' can draw the grub to the hole. Savvy?'

A long, stiff, hooked wire was pushed into the hut.

'Why am I being kept here?' demanded Charlie. 'I should think you might have been satisfied with robbing me. I shall——'

'Yo' keep a civil tongue between your teeth,' he

was advised. 'If yo' give any lip it'll bring yo' trouble.'

'How long am I to be kept here?' persisted the prisoner.

'It's nothin' to do with me,' was the reply. 'All yo've got to do is to wait an' see. Is your ticker goin'? It's about half-past six. I'll drop some more warm tea down about three o'clock this afternoon. It all depends whether there's anybody about.'

'Will you tell me——?' commenced Charlie.

'I'll tell yo' nothin', only one thing,' interrupted the man. 'If yo' get bawlin' for help yo'll get the candles took off yo'. Most likely yo'll get gagged as well. Yo' look out for a bottle at three o'clock. It'll be in a baskit.'

'Will you send word to my home that I am all right?' asked Charlie. 'It would ease my sister's mind and it could be done without giving you away.'

There was no answer!

He repeated the inquiry with his mouth close to the hole, but his appeal elicited no response.

'Coo-o-o! Coo-o-o!'

'Hallo, Peggy!' exclaimed Charlie. 'I'm glad he didn't see or hear you.'

He paused suddenly. An idea entered his brain. Excitement shone in his face.

'Three o'clock!' he muttered. 'Nine hours to wait! I'll try it!'

CHAPTER XVII

DOUBLED TROUBLE

WHEN the minister suddenly appeared in their midst, Jarrocks and Smith could not have been more surprised had the roof suddenly come toppling in upon them. If their astonishment were equal, the same could not be said of the emotions to which the clergyman's appearance gave rise. Clem welcomed him as an invaluable ally; the manager viewed him with intense disfavour. Mary exhibited not the slightest wonder, an attitude that carried a most unpleasant suggestion to Mr. Jarrocks.

'We did not hear you knock, sir,' he said.

'There was no need,' was the reply. 'I have been only a few feet away for some time.'

The manager looked at him resentfully.

'How long?' he asked. A dull flush was in his cheeks, and anger quivered in his voice.

'I came in with Mary,' answered Mr. Davenant, in a tone of calm indifference.

'Then you've heard——'

'Everything,' interrupted the clergyman.

'It's what a parson would do, I suppose,' said Jarrocks. 'It's a sneaking trick——'

'It is,' acknowledged Mr. Davenant. 'I cannot imagine anything more detestable than to endeavour to coerce a defenceless girl into a marriage by means of threats. It filled me with unutterable disgust; I did not think a man could descend so low.'

Jarrocks, swept by a great gust of ungovernable passion, rushed upon the clergyman with uplifted fist. But Clem Smith stepped nimbly between them, warding off the blow and dropping into a posture of defence.

'Heer, Mestur Jorrucks, we'n ha' noan o' thet,' he said. 'If theer's goin' tew be a scrap yo'n hev tew tak' me on. Aw'se noan much o' a passon's mon, but tha' doant 'it 'im, if on'y cos he's bin a gud soart tew ma' muther.'

Jarrocks made no second offensive movement. Clem was remarkably handy with his fists, as had often been proved in the mill-yard.

The manager glared first at one and then the other. He seized his hat and turned to pass out of the room.

'Do not forget the money, Mr. Jarrocks,' the minister reminded him.

'I won't take it,' was the angry reply. 'It isn't ——' He hesitated. 'I'll wait until the secretary pays me the money himself,' he concluded.

Mr. Davenant noticed the hesitancy and the correction. He was becoming more and more

imbued with the belief that the man was keeping something back ; but he forbore to give any inkling of his suspicion.

'You can please yourself,' he replied. 'If you do not take it I shall send word to the members by Smith, that they can receive their dividends by calling upon me at my house.'

Mr. Jarrocks thought it well to reconsider his decision.

'I'll take it,' he said. 'If Charlie turns up with the bank money, he'll have to put it in his pocket, that's all.'

'Whether that will be all, will depend entirely upon circumstances,' replied the clergyman. To Smith there was a suggestion of a threat in the words. Jarrocks, too, recognized it. He opened his mouth to retort, but thought better of it. He was putting the money into his pocket without taking the trouble to count it.

'You've got the receipt ready, Mary,' said Mr. Davenant, and she took it out of her pocket and handed it to him.

The manager looked inquiringly at each of them. It seemed to him that they had forecasted this scene with remarkable accuracy. He scrutinized the paper suspiciously. The fact that it was in Mr. Davenant's writing added to his wonderment, and whipped him into fresh anger. He seemed about to refuse to sign, but across the stamp scrawled his

signature with the fountain pen which the clergyman laid upon the table.

'It says: "Received of Mr. Charles Farleigh,"' he objected, while still holding the receipt in his hand.

'The members of the club will not quibble about that,' answered the clergyman.

Without another word Jarrocks strode into the front room, opened the door, and passed out into the street. Simultaneously there was a knock at the back. Clem Smith answered it.

'Coom in, Ned,' he said. 'Hev yo' gor eny news of Chawlie.'

Gorman entered, shaking his head.

'Noabry's sin 'im; noabry's heerd a wurd abaat 'im,' replied the new-comer. 'We'n tried ivrywheer—'ospital, p'lice staation, railwaay staation, an' ivrywheer yo' ca' think. Wha' to dew next we doant knaw.'

'Aw'm thinkin' Aw'se knawin' wheer yo' ha'nt lukt,' said Clem. 'Rough Hills is th' plaace, yo' tak' ma wurd.'

That called for an explanation concerning the necessity of Charlie paying a visit to Loombridge. Ned listened in silence until Clem ended his rapid recital.

'Dang it awl!' cried Gorman. 'Worra we sikin' ower sheeded milk wot inna spilt yit, p'raps. We mun set out tew sarch f'r him. A gradely foine lad he is, an' Aw'll na care a toffee dog who ses he inna.

Coom on, Clem,' he added, 'we'n goo an' git t' chaaps togither.'

Nodding to Mary, and touching their forelocks to the minister, the two mill-hands left the kitchen almost at a run.

Mr. Davenant only stayed a few minutes longer. He intended to seek the aid of the police. Mary was still rather nervous concerning the suggestion, but he laughed at her fears.

'We do but call upon them to look for your brother,' he assured her. 'Even supposing Charlie has done wrong, no charge could now be made against him. We can do no more until daylight comes.' He knew there would be no question of sleep for the Farleighs. He added: 'If any news come, send word to me immediately. Never mind what time it is, I shall turn out. If I were a younger man I should join Gorman and Smith. They are two good fellows and will collect many willing helpers. You may depend upon it every possible effort will be made to solve the puzzle. Pray God it be a pleasant solution.'

The moment the clergyman had gone Mary flew to the stairs in order to tell Belle and Tom all that she knew of the mystery. She was not the least bit surprised to find that they were sitting on the steps. They had not heard a word of the interview between Mary and Mr. Jarrocks, but Clem Smith's arrival had drawn them to the foot of the stairs.

Belle was weeping quietly, and Tom had difficulty in restraining his tears. He at once put on his coat and cap. He looked about in search of a muffler.

'What are you going to do?' asked Mary.

'I'm going to Rough Hills,' he replied. 'I must go and help to find Charlie.'

She made no attempt to interfere with the lad's purpose.

'Do take care, Tom,' she pleaded. 'Don't fall into any—any hole.'

'I'll stick to the men,' he replied, 'and I'll run back presently and tell you how they are getting on.'

A moment later the two girls were alone.

'Oh, Mary!' sobbed Belle. 'What shall we do? What shall we do? We're no sooner out of trouble than we are in it again, worse than ever. It seems as though God forgets us.'

'Hush, child! You must not talk so,' remonstrated the older girl. 'We've had many trials, but we've had many blessings. Kneel with me, Belle, and pray—pray for Charlie.'

The schoolgirl obeyed.

'Pray, Belle!' Mary urged her sister.

Poor Belle tried in vain to collect her whirling thoughts. She shook her head weakly in token of her inability to accede. But even while she sought for words in which to pray for light, for help, for deliverance from the woe that oppressed them, she found unexpected eloquence upon the tip of her

tongue. Subconsciously she commenced to sing in a voice so low as scarcely to be audible—

> Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
> The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
> When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
> Help of the helpless, oh abide with me.

By the end of the first verse both girls were keenly alive to the inner meaning of the words they sang; they recognized the healing balm that was conveyed to their distracted minds. They sang on, and if the tune suffered a little from their sobs, it lost nothing in intensest feeling.

> Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
> Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
> Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
> In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

The slow hours lagged on. The fire had died down into black ashes; the lamp hanging over the table was giving feeble flickers within its besmoked glass chimney. Mary and Belle, with their arms upon the table, slept the heavy sleep of mental and physical prostration. It were well for them if Morpheus could keep them tight in his slumberous clasp until they could awake, perchance, to find there was no need for grief.

But Giant Cotton, with conscienceless disregard, sounded the factory hooters to denote his hungry maw was ready for his fluffy provender. Tommy

Nobbler had already passed along Textile Row, but what his knockings on adjacent doors had not achieved, the steam bellowings did not fail to accomplish.

Mary raised her head from her arm. For a moment she was at a loss to account for her position. Then memory pricked and lashed her into realization of their trouble. She arose quietly from her seat so as not to disturb Belle. She stepped quietly into the front room, from which she could hear the clattering of the clogs of the operatives as they hurried off to the mills.

'Where is Tom?' she wondered. He had been out of doors all through the long night. 'Where is Charlie? Oh! where is Charlie?' she asked herself with a sob. And as if in direct answer, Tom at that moment entered the house by the back door.

He brought no good news. Neither did he bring bad for that matter. The most careful inspection revealed no trace of Charlie. There was no comfort in that. The men had but searched aboveground, and in the darkness their non-success could not be taken as conclusive. What of the gaping shafts? There was horror in the very mention of them. Only daylight could prove whether one or other of them contained a ghastly secret, the mere thought of which almost paralysed Mary.

'They have ceased searching now, I suppose,' said Mary.

'No fear!' replied Tom. 'A few of them have gone off to work, but the others say they'll play all day. They don't care if Jarrocks gives them the sack. As soon as it's light the police are going to drag the shafts,' he added very quietly.

Mary shuddered, but made no reply. She was lighting a candle preparatory to extinguishing the dying light that still flickered on the red charred lamp-wick.

All day on Wednesday Spindleton was agog. It was not often that there was an exciting subject for conversation to lighten the drab days, most of the waking hours of which were claimed by the myriad wheels and bobbins. Rumours circulated through the town like fire, only to be chased by immediate contradiction. First Charlie had taken train to Manchester; later on his destination was said to be London. An unknown man had been found cut to pieces on the railway near Stockport; everybody jumped to the conclusion that they knew for a certainty who was the unfortunate. He turned out to be a tramp of fifty-five.

When the dinner-hour arrived, it was current that the missing secretary had forwarded the club money to the treasurer per registered post from Preston; and the fact that the money was distributed was quoted in proof. Bill Jarrocks had stated that Mary had handed the money to him, but that was waved aside as too remote a possibility for credence

In the event of its truth, then young Farleigh had disappeared to avoid some disgrace far worse than theft, and all sorts of mysterious and unfathomed crimes were forthwith tentatively laid to his charge.

The only certain thing was that on Rough Hills, every likely, and even unlikely, shaft had been dragged in vain. Their silence and darkness yielded up no body ; they provided no clue. Some of those who had struggled against it, now found themselves compelled to believe that Farleigh's absence was not the result of foul play. It was clear that he had absconded with the money, or, if he had gone without it, for some worse reason best known to himself.

The Farleighs were wild with grief. It was useless for any one to point out that the failure to find any trace of their brother contained at least some element of comfort, for if he were not dead in the immediate neighbourhood, then the probability was that he was alive elsewhere. The dull December day darkened down into an evening of reeking mist that utterly forbade any further search, even if there existed any likely spot in which to continue the quest.

Thursday was a repetition of Wednesday. There were still rumours of various kinds ; there was still searching of a haphazard and spasmodic character. But again darkness settled upon Spindleton without the merest lifting of the veil of mystery that enshrouded the fate of Charlie Farleigh.

It was not until tea-time that Mary set out to pay

a visit to the garage at Manchester. Mr. Davenant on Wednesday had telephoned to inquire whether Charlie had presented himself as usual, only to receive a reply in the negative. To-day inquiry met with the same reply. As soon as it was dark it was the enforced inactivity that caused Mary to decide to go to Manchester, taking Tom with her.

The journey was a fruitless one. The garage manager could suggest no reason for Charlie's voluntary disappearance. All he could do was to express his regret at the absence of one of his most promising pupils.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Mary and Tom reached home. They knocked the front door, and, receiving no reply, went round to the back. The lamp in the kitchen was alight ; there was a good fire burning in the grate ; the kettle was singing upon the hob. The table was laid for supper, only awaiting tea to be made to complete the preparations for the meal.

But Belle was not there ! She was not upstairs. She was at none of the neighbours'.

'She has gone to the station to meet us,' said Mary. 'Her jacket and hat have gone.'

Tom did not answer for a moment. He had picked up an envelope that was lying upon the table. There was nothing in it, however, neither did it bear any address.

The question uppermost in the minds of each was,

'What had the envelope contained?' It might have been merely an advertisement or concern some simple matter of Belle's. In any case they would have to wait until she returned to enlighten them.

But Belle did not return! She was not at the station. Nobody recollected seeing her since tea-time. She had vanished into thin air. Mary and Tom were wrestling with additional trouble that threatened to unhinge their reason.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. JARROCKS SEES DANGER AHEAD

FRIDAY dawned beautifully clear. There was a snap of frost in the air. It was not at all unlikely that a fall of snow was imminent to give Christmas just the one old-fashioned touch to make it perfectly seasonable.

Christmas! The season redolent of Peace on Earth and the fragrance of home joys! What peace could Mary Farleigh know? What joy could come to that desolated, stricken home? Mrs. Davenant, indeed, feared for the girl's sanity. She had practically been without sleep since Tuesday, and the purple shadows under her eyes, which shone sunkenly in her wan set features, told of the terrible suspense she was enduring. She would certainly break down under the strain. That was why the minister instructed a nurse to look in at number sixteen as often as possible during the day. Tom was not at work. Even had he desired to go, Mary would not allow him out of her sight. She was filled with dread that out of the unknown would be stretched some unseen hand to rob her of him.

Spindleton hummed with excitement. The new development was so utterly inexplicable. Those who had harshly judged Charlie were obliged to revise their opinions. If they had preferred to believe that he was 'a wrang un,' there was no reason for including Belle in the same category; and it would be difficult to persuade anybody to believe the disappearances of the brother and sister had no connexion with each other.

Mr. Jarrocks was absent from Spindleton on Thursday night. He had gone to Liverpool on business just before the day's work ended. He was in a blazing ill-humour when he left the mill at five o'clock.

Ned Gorman, Clem Smith, and at least seven or eight other hands had not put in an appearance at the mill on Wednesday. At night the manager sent word to them that if they were not in their usual places on Thursday the gates would be closed to them. In justification of this action he pleaded that they were hard pressed to complete some orders before the Alabama closed for the Christmas holidays; and that the search for Farleigh might very well be left to the police.

On Thursday morning Gorman and Smith were still absent, and Jarrocks announced that they were no longer in the employ of John Glynn & Sons. Just before the manager set out for Liverpool one of the oldest employés sought an interview with

him. The old man was very brief and very blunt. He came to present an ultimatum from the men. Jarrocks had quite miscalculated the popular feeling, and was genuinely surprised to find what a storm he was bringing about his ears. Without the slightest preamble he was told that unless he reversed his decision concerning Gorman and Smith, the mill would open on Friday morning without a single man upon the premises. Doubtless most of the women and girls would follow suit, but even supposing they did not, the mill would necessarily be at a standstill.

In vain did the manager argue; his blustering was equally non-effective. He was willing to reinstate Gorman, but wished for time to consider the case of Smith. The men's representative was obdurate; he would make no concession, and with a very ill grace Jarrocks had to acknowledge himself beaten.

If the manager were in a better temper when he entered the mill at ten o'clock on Friday, he did not long remain so. He drove from the station direct to the Alabama, and went straight into his office to look at his correspondence. He opened several letters and duly noted their contents. Then came one evidently of rather a disturbing character. He read it a second time with snarling lips, while he ran his fingers irritably through his hair. He was vigorously cursing some unknown person under his breath.

On Monday morning he had received a letter from the same correspondent—Mr. Dudley Forster, of Quality Court, Chancery Lane, London—asking what had become of the letter which the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers had entrusted to him to post. He had replied by return informing the gentleman the place and hour when the letter was posted. At the same time he suggested that Mr. Forster report to the post office the fact that the missive had failed to reach its destination. The manager had hoped thus to ward off further inquiry, or in any case delay it until anything appertaining to Mary Farleigh was merged into the affairs of Mrs. William Jarrocks. When that point was reached, the assistance of the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers and his legal friend would be neither necessary nor desirable.

Mr. Forster, however, had not fallen in with the mill manager's views. He had now written to say that he proposed to come down to Spindleton in person, and trusted the manager would be able to render him some assistance in the matter.

The nerves, and no less the temper, of Mr. Jarrocks since Tuesday last had become much the worse for wear. He was beginning to realize the foolishness of entering upon a course of duplicity in which there were so many possibilities of being found out. It appeared to him that he was in danger of being tripped up by every single obstacle. It would need all his acumen to avoid coming to grief badly. Yet

even while he grasped his danger, he had recourse to a remedy that would fail him when the pinch came. He went over to a cupboard from which he took a bottle of spirits. He poured out a good stiff glass and took the fiery liquid almost at a single gulp.

An hour later he was seeking similar consolation. He was more perturbed than ever. The office boy, Midgley, had come in with a note that had just been delivered by hand. In quite a casual manner the manager asked him whether there was any news of Charlie Farleigh. The question was answered in the negative. And then he proceeded to relate the startling news that Belle Farleigh had disappeared the previous evening.

'Do you mean she's lost?' asked Mr. Jarrocks.

'Old Tommy Nobbler called at the house at eight o'clock,' replied Midgley. 'Belle was waiting for Mary and Tom to return home from Manchester. Tommy only stayed a few minutes. He was the last to set eyes on her.'

Midgley was about to launch forth upon the various rumours that were current concerning the girl's disappearance, when he was cut short by a startled, angry exclamation from the manager. He had torn open the note and was reading it. The boy thought afterwards that he had never seen a man so furious; and he was quite positive he had never heard worse language than Mr. Jarrocks was

applying to either the contents or the writer of the note.

Jarrocks was too evidently shaken out of himself to remember that he was not alone. When he did think of the boy, he vainly endeavoured to remember what he had said.

He dived his hand into his pocket and withdrew a florin.

'Here, Midgley,' he said. 'This is for you. While in Liverpool I was very ill. The pain has come on again. It makes me scarcely know what I am doing. Mind you don't say a word to anybody about it, or you'll have to look out for a fresh job.'

The boy, filled with wonder, left the office, and Mr. Jarrocks sought more Dutch courage in the cupboard.

At midday he went home to luncheon, instead of taking it at an hotel in the town, according to his usual custom. It might be that a conversation he had with his groom would do something to effect the restoration of his composure. The interview took place in the dining-room behind closed doors. That the matter was more than ordinarily private in character was evidenced by Mr. Jarrocks twice going to the door to see that nobody was eavesdropping.

'See him at once, Jobson,' he urged in conclusion. 'Tell him he has made an infernal mess of it, and unless he gets me out of the lumber to-night, I'll

wring his neck. Put 'em both out on the top when it's pitch-dark and make yourself scarce. You can arrange to meet him at Preston on Boxing Day. If he does it neatly I'll double his pay.'

Jobson inclined his head obsequiously. If he were an honest man it were useless to attempt to gauge character by outward appearances. He was bullet headed, with ears sticking out almost comically at right angles. His eyebrows were just curveless splotches of hair like badly worn small wire brushes, in attendance upon two blobby eyes, dull, green, and fishy. A recent blow had badly blackened them. His nose was lost in the midst of the pasty complexion. It appeared to have been dabbed on as an afterthought, and might have escaped attention could one have avoided speculating how much it had cost its owner to make it such a colour-study in varying shades of red. His mouth was still more unpleasant in character; it was just a wide gash, in which appeared a few stumpy, uneven, tobacco-stained teeth. Nature had given him one more mark of her displeasure in a rasping voice.

'Double pay, did you say, sir?' croaked Jobson, with what he meant for an ingratiating smile.

'That was what I said,' replied his master. 'Only if he gets clear away and no suspicions roused. Your pay depends upon it, too. You'd better put your heads together and make a good job of it.'

The groom again nodded his head. He meant it

to signify understanding and agreement in one. He went out of the room by one of the French windows, and Jarrocks watched him thoughtfully, until he disappeared down a path that led towards the stables.

He had scarcely turned his back upon the window before Jobson was back, tapping the glass discreetly with his finger. He did not appear nearly so satisfied as when he had left the room a few moments earlier, quietly elated at the prospect of double pay for some service to his master in which he was to play a part. He was now distinctly worried.

'Gipsy's come, sir!' the man exclaimed, as soon as the window was open. 'He'll ruin everything. He's as drunk as a boiled owl. I found him in the stable yard. He was shaking hands with the pump and advising it to be friendly like and give beer instead of water. You know what a gormed fool he can be when he tries. He'll spoil the whole show.'

'I'll spoil him,' said the mill manager, as he strode out into the garden. In his haste he left the path and walked across a couple of flower beds, planted with bulbs that had not yet shown themselves above the soil.

One glance at Gipsy Matthews was sufficient to indicate his origin. His dark hair and swarthy features; the rings that pierced his ears; and various bizarre features in his dress, unfailingly denoted Romany extraction.

If Mr. Jarrocks desired the co-operation of Gipsy in any measures that called for care and collectedness, there was little cause for wonder at his angry disgust. The man was utterly unfitted for anything but sleep —a long sleep, too, if he were to wake with his wits about him. The moment he recognized the manager he made an effort to pull himself together. He saluted with a drunken solemnity that at some other time would have moved Jarrocks to laughter. Instead, it provoked him to gusts of blasphemy that almost made Jobson wince ; and he was not afflicted with any solicitude for niceties in speech.

'You drunken swiller!' hissed the mill manager. 'I've half a mind to put you under the pump.'

Matthews raised himself into as erect a posture as his uncertain legs would allow.

'Wharrer-marrer?' he asked protestingly. 'Me, drunk? I'm as sober as—as——'

'Put him in the loft to sleep it off,' decided Jarrocks. 'I'll see him again at teatime.'

Jobson led the man away, and his master returned to the house.

Half an hour later Jarrocks set out to return to the mill. He went the back way so as to give a parting instruction to the groom. Before he reached the stables he could hear Matthews singing at the top of his voice. The manager's face was instantly a study in evil emotions ; but when he got sufficiently near to distinguish the words, he grew posi-

'YOU MISERABLE BULLY!' CRIED CHARLIE.

G.A.O.

tively livid. He sprang into the stable to the foot of the ladder that led into the loft.

'Shut the fool's mouth,' he cried angrily. 'Put a gag in his ugly trap.'

Jobson was not above as he had supposed, and if Gipsy heard his words he chose to ignore them. He went on with his vocal exercise—

Down among the dead men,
Down among the dead men,
Let him lie,
Let them lie.

CHAPTER XIX

A NOTE PER PIGEON POST

MR. JARROCKS was seated in his office. Inwardly he was considerably perturbed, but there was no sign of it when a visitor was ushered into his presence. He pushed his papers on one side and rose to greet the stranger.

'Mr. Forster, I presume,' he remarked pleasantly, as he motioned the gentleman to a seat. He was mentally taking the measure of the young barrister, and what he observed was not calculated to afford him overweening satisfaction. The Honourable Kenyon Ferrers' friend was alive to his finger tips—offensively alert, in the estimation of the manager. He came to that conclusion even while the gentleman nodded in confirmation of his surmise.

'You are already aware of the object of my visit,' commenced Mr. Forster. 'I will first give you the facts of the case so far as I know them. A few days ago I received from my friend the Hon. Kenyon Ferrers a cablegram, the brief terms of which I utterly failed to understand. I cabled

back for enlightenment. The reply was to the effect that you held a letter which would afford me all necessary particulars. You have already informed me that the letter was posted; I never received it. A letter of such importance ought to have been registered. I am surprised that so many of you ordinarily keen business men are so lax in——'

'I was not aware of its special importance,' interrupted Mr. Jarrocks. 'Mr. Ferrers laid no particular stress upon it and consequently it was posted in the usual way—at least, as it happened, not quite in the usual way. It wasn't put with the general office correspondence. One of our office boys posted it with four or five of my own letters.' He put his finger on an electric button. 'When you first wrote me, I asked the boy whether he had posted them, and he assured me that he had. He is a trustworthy lad, and answers to my own letters came in due course. When I spoke to him, I accepted his word and made no attempt to refresh his memory.'

A clerk opened the door. 'Send Midgley to me,' ordered the manager. 'You will be able to question him yourself,' he added to Mr. Forster.

When the boy appeared, Mr. Jarrocks addressed him.

'You remember those letters you posted for me,' he said, 'one of which I have since told you has gone astray?'

'Yes sir!' replied the boy brightly.

'Can you tell this gentleman anything you may remember about them?'

Midgley looked from one to the other in turn. He rather failed to grasp the manager's meaning.

'How many there were, to whom they were addressed, or anything of that kind,' explained his master.

'There were five or six, sir. I'm not quite sure which. Oh!' he exclaimed, 'one of them was a gentleman's letter. Mr.—Mr.—the gentleman who was here a great deal, sir.'

'Mr. Ferrers,' suggested the manager.

'Yes, sir. That was it. You told me to take great care because of it.'

Mr. Jarrocks nodded knowingly to his visitor, as much as to say that he could now wash his hands of the letter.

Mr. Forster was pinching his chin between his thumb and forefinger.

'Did you notice the letter addressed to Forster, Quality Court, Chancery Lane?' he asked the boy.

'No, sir, I saw none of the addresses,' answered the boy. 'I dropped the letters into the box just as Mr. Jarrocks gave them to me.'

The gentleman pursed his lips as he nodded his head. He made no remark, but all the same the manager would dearly have liked to strike that expressive mouth.

'Why not cable Mr. Ferrers for the information in full?' inquired he.

'Impossible!' replied Mr. Forster. 'He has gone on into the wilds of Oregon, and goodness knows how much further. It will be weeks before I can again get into touch with him.'

'That's very annoying,' remarked Mr. Jarrocks sympathetically. He tried hard to restrain an intonation of satisfaction. Although up to the present his scheme had failed to develop on the lines he wished, there might be still time and opportunity to mend matters, if the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers could only be kept in the background.

He found that Mr. Forster was eyeing him in a preoccupied manner that was unreadable. He wished he could fathom the thoughts behind the clear grey eyes. As if in answer to the desire his visitor recollected himself. He suddenly asked a question—

'Do you know a young lady named ——?'

Second thoughts appeared to lead him not to complete the query.

Incomplete as it was, it caused the mill manager to give a perceptible start, which was not lost upon Mr. Forster.

'Do I know—know——' half stammered Mr. Jarrocks.

'Miss Farleigh.'

To the manager the name was like a stone from a catapult.

'Ye—es!' he acknowledged. 'At least she's not a lady. Until a few days ago she was a mill-hand in this very mill. I don't suppose you mean her, though.'

'A mill-hand?' queried Mr. Forster, musingly. 'I doubt whether we can be thinking of the same person. Why did she leave?'

'Well, I think the real reason lay in a quarrel her brother had with the overseer. She gave it out that she was going to keep house for her brother, who had found a better job.'

Jarrocks was wishing this pestering lawyer fellow had remained in London. There was no telling to what his queries might lead. He decided not to volunteer any information; but upon the other hand he could not very well refuse to answer direct questions. The sooner he put an end to the interview the better. Furtively he dropped his hand on the electric button; he pressed it staccato fashion three times.

Half a minute later there was a tap at the door.

'Come in!' called out the manager.

It was an elderly clerk who presented himself with an apologetic air.

'Sorry to disturb you, sir,' he said to the manager. 'Number three mule has gone wrong again. They've sent down for you.'

Mr. Jarrocks turned to his visitor and spread out his hands deprecatingly.

'I'm afraid I shall have to go,' he announced. 'I regret not to have been able to assist you more. Are you returning straight to Town?'

Mr. Forster gave not the slightest indication that he recognized how the interview was being summarily closed. He had a similar understanding with his own clerk in order to get rid of bores, or other unprofitable callers. 'It does not seem much use my staying, does it?' he said.

Mr. Jarrocks half frowned as though it caused him grief to have to acquiesce in the opinion.

'There's a train at four-thirty. It is an express, and one of the best trains in the day.' His voice displayed quite unconscious eagerness to speed the parting guest—just the one thing needful to assure the visitor of the desirability of not being hurried out of Spindleton.

'I will wish you good-day, Mr. Jarrocks,' replied Mr. Forster. He did not say he should go by the express, nor did he offer his hand as the manager showed him out. When the door closed behind him Jarrocks shook his fist in the direction of the retreating figure.

'Hang him!' he muttered. 'What does he know? When I get out of this double boggle into which Matthews has landed me, I must be careful. That chap reminded me of a cursed detective.'

It was significant that the manager altogether ignored the request that he would go to give advice concerning the machine that was out of gear. Instead, he sent for young Midgley, to whom he issued some instructions in a very low tone. The boy appeared surprised, as though he were being asked to do something unusual, but he nodded his head and passed out of the office.

Mr. Forster did not go to the railway station. He went in an entirely opposite direction. Although he was not acquainted with the town he did not ask anybody to direct him. Opposite the George Hotel in High Street he paused and consulted his watch. It was teatime, and he passed up the steps into the commercial room. Very shortly he was seated before a substantial meal, for the express by which he had travelled from London was without a dining-saloon.

'Do you know a young lady named Farleigh?' He directed the question to the waitress.

'Do you mean Mary Farleigh, sir?' she answered. 'They are the only Farleighs I know in Spindleton. Everybody has heard of them, I should think.'

The girl needed no invitation, and forthwith commenced a voluble account of Charlie's disappearance on Tuesday night, followed forty-eight hours later by the vanishing of his younger sister. By a judicious question here and there, the barrister was able

to sort out fact from fable and gain a tolerably clear idea of what had happened. The outstanding features were that two persons had mysteriously disappeared without leaving any trace behind them; the police had got no clue; and there was no suspicion resting upon anybody.

The barrister permitted her to continue without interruption.

'I thought Farleigh had simply bolted with the money,' said the girl. 'Most folks said it at first, thinking perhaps the motoring had filled him up with big ideas. But when the girl disappeared in a flash, in a manner of speaking, it made things look different. It's just awful.'

'What do you mean by motoring?' asked Forster. 'I thought Farleigh was a mill-hand.'

'He used to be, sir,' she replied, 'till Lord Ferrers —they say he is a lord—set him to learn motor driving, so that he can drive his big red car for him.'

The barrister was now thoroughly interested, and the girl went on adding additional facts and still more surmises. She was quite pleased at the effect her descriptive powers were exerting upon the stranger. She did not know that he was now scarcely listening to her; he recognized that he had winnowed all her grain, and the chaff could blow whither it listed. He was analysing and weighing the mill manager's attitude. Why had he not informed him of these stirring occurrences? He knew that

Farleigh was a protégé of Ferrers, and yet had satisfied himself by referring to the motor driving tuition as a new job. Why had he fought shy of references to Mary Farleigh? Why had he been so anxious for him to return to London? Why——

Mr. Forster, while propounding these questions to himself, had walked across the room. He looked through the window on to the well-lighted pavement outside. He started and drew back to complete, or more probably to substitute an entirely different query.

'Why was Jarrocks' office boy standing outside, unless he had been set to watch his movements?'

He turned round to the girl, who was now clearing the table.

'I am greatly obliged for all that you have told me,' he said. 'I am deeply interested. Perhaps you can inform me where the Farleighs live.'

'In Textile Row, sir. It's in a street at the back of the Mission Hall. Anybody will point out the way. Mr. Davenant, the minister, is such a nice man. Oh! he has been most kind to Mary Farleigh. Goodness knows what she would have done without him.'

Mr. Forster paid his bill; and the waitress beamed at the tip he placed upon her tray.

'I want you to do me one more service,' he said. 'Show me out by a back way.'

A quarter of an hour later he was closeted with

Mr. Davenant in his study, learning practically most of the information which the missing letter would have afforded him. While they were still in anxious consultation they were interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Davenant.

The lady was too excited to pay any heed to her husband's visitor.

'Ambrose,' she said, 'Tom Farleigh is here. Mary has sent him to say that she knows where Charlie is!'

The two gentlemen sprang to their feet.

'Where?' jerked out Mr. Davenant.

'Tom cannot say, but Mary knows. She desires to see you at once.'

In two minutes the minister and his visitor were hurrying along the poorly-lighted, drab street that cut through the small forest of dwellings of the mill-workers.

Arrived at number sixteen, Textile Row, the clergyman introduced Mr. Forster as a friend of Mr. Ferrers.

The barrister was frankly surprised at the type of girl he found in this mean little tenement. He was not quite sure what was the colour of her hair, there was a wealth of it, and even the poor lamplight revealed in it flecks of burnished gold. He was meeting her when anguish and lack of sleep had driven every vestige of colour out of her cheeks; her tired, heavy-lidded eyes shone like live coals in

their setting of deadly pallor. But nothing could rob her lineaments of their regularity of outline with the delicately chiselled nose and the half parted red lips. He was startled out of his good manners, and only recollected himself, when he heard her drawing Mr. Davenant's attention to a man who had risen from his chair upon their entrance.

'Tell Mr. Davenant, will you please,' Mary said to him.

'Ma name is Samuel Merry,' the man commenced. 'Aw coom fra' Loombridge. Aw bawt a pigin orf Chawlie Farleigh a toime back. Las' Munday ma lad chucked th' burd oop at Slubley. He nivver coomed back till—well he warnt back o' Wensday morn. Ma lad con sweer tew thet. A Thursday dinner time—thet's yisterday—he spotted 'im wi' th' rest o' ma burds, an' on 'is leg was tied a bit o' paaper. He lukt at it. Theer wurr writin' on it. It said: "Aw'm down th' Longpike pit. C.F.' Aw cudna mek it oot. Then Aw thoght th' burd had bin back at Farleigh's, as he had twice afoor. Soa las' neet Aw sent ma lad ower ta this haase wi' th' bit paaper in a envilope. He ses he gin it tew a gel. Aw on'y heerd 'bout Chawlie bein' lost this afternoon as Aw've bin bad in bed awl th' wick. An' soa Aw coomed tew see 'bout it.'

Mr. Davenant was seizing his hat.

'I'll go and ring up Inspector Stimson,' he said. 'He must know of this note per pigeon post.'

'Charlie had old Peggy in his pocket on Tuesday night,' said Tom to Mr. Forster. 'He broke his leg once and we mended it with a splint. That's how he got his name.'

CHAPTER XX

A DRAMATIC MEETING

LONG after Charlie Farleigh's mysterious visitor had left him in the gloom and silence, he sat a prey to varying emotions. He cudgelled his brains in a vain effort to guess the object of his detention, and particularly who were the persons responsible for it. They had robbed him; they were detaining him; but there now appeared reason to believe that he need fear no further active violence.

His greatest trouble was the effect his absence would have upon his sisters and brother. They would be giving him up for dead, and would be plunged into bitterest grief. If they could only be informed that be was still in the land of the living, he would have settled down to endure his imprisonment with far greater fortitude. He sat with his eyes bent upon the sputtering dip.

'Coo-o-o! Coo-o-o!'

Charlie looked up. He had forgotten the bird again for the moment. He stood upon the box and lifted Peggy down. He rubbed his cheek

against his feathers ; very dear to him was this one living companion in the black hole in which he was shut out of the world. Upon the top of the box he crumbled some bread, and better still in his jacket pocket he found half a handful of peas.

He watched the bird as he pecked up the food. There was work for Peggy to do, and this was a very necessary preparation.

Upon a tiny scrap of paper, not much bigger than a postage stamp, he carefully wrote a few words. How thankful he was that he happened to have a little stump of blacklead ! But he possessed no cotton or anything that would serve its purpose. He was filled with despair until he thought of unroving one of his socks. He read and re-read what he had written ; the paper would hold no more, and it was the only piece he had got. Then with the thin worsted he bound it to Peggy's leg.

How the minutes dragged ! They moved all the more slowly because he so consistently watched their flight. Scores of times he studied the face of his watch. It was a very remote probability that he would overrun the time. Too much depended upon the plan he had in view for him not to be ready at three o'clock. Three o'clock !

Long before the appointed hour Charlie was practising with his wire rod. From a quarter to three he continually swept the hook in a half circle from the little aperture as its centre. But he

came in contact with nothing to break that incorporeal blackness outside.

Three o'clock arrived, and he groped about with desperate energy, almost sobbing in the intensity of his expectation, and the dread that something aboveground would prevent the carrying out of the promise of his jailer. He had intimated that he would only do it if it could be accomplished unobserved. Charlie prayed that everybody would give the shaft a very wide berth.

He was not thinking of the warm tea, acceptable as it would be. He was prepared to forgo it entirely if he could only get hold of the basket. What would it be like, he wondered, as he worked his wire as far as he could reach. He prayed it would be an open one. Perhaps the wire was not long enough to reach. He peered through the hole to see if he could distinguish anything.

Joy! Joy! He struck a dangling cord. A moment later he had caught it in the hook and drawn it to him. His hand trembled as he grasped what was only a stout cord. He heard something jar slightly against the side of the hut. Very carefully he drew it up a couple of feet or so. It was rather a shallow basket, with a good strong handle to which the cord was attached. It promised to serve his purpose well.

He drew it into the hut and removed the tin bottle of tea, the warmth of which was very grateful

to his half-numbed fingers. Taking hold of Peggy he placed him in the little basket, and then carefully lowered it and his bird messenger outside. He gave the cord several jerks in the hope that they would be recognized as a signal that he had received the tea. And then he loosed the cord to allow the bird to swing into the darkness.

Seizing his candle, he held it close to the hole. He could just discern the merest glint of the bird's light feathers. He was in mortal terror that Peggy would fly to him if he remained there. He blew out the light to prevent what would be a heartbreaking contretemps.

For some minutes Charlie stood quite still. His heart beat furiously ; his breath came in short, quick gasps. He was altogether in a state of pitiable expectancy. After what seemed an eternity he again lighted his candle. He looked out. That almost imperceptible patch of white had gone. To make doubly sure he pushed out his hook, to meet—nothing.

His bird friend was the emblem of hope that would prevent his soul sinking in despair. Hope is ever the god of the miserable ; calamity grips never so tightly but that hope will animate the heart with strength and courage.

Even the forlornest hope will combat despondency. It rallied Charlie immensely. It afforded him food for speculation ; it took his mind off the worst

horrors of his situation. It was just the one slender chance upon which possibly his life, or at any rate his reason, might depend.

He had done all that lay in his power; the rest lay upon the knees of the gods. It was something to get the bird aboveground, from which point might arise a dozen and one contingencies to thwart his purpose. The unknown individual who had lowered the tea would almost certainly perceive the bird; he might, indeed it was very likely, effect its capture. Upon arrival at the top it was highly probable that Peggy would be a trifle confused after his dark experience.

Supposing the bird took immediate flight, there remained the uncertainty whether he would return to his new or his old home. Tom Farleigh was not much interested in pigeons, and might not perceive that the bird had come back. If he returned to Loombridge the same possibility existed, and even if the scrap of paper were discovered its significance might not be realized.

Charlie now wished that he had added his address to the message. In fact, the more he considered the matter the less prospect of success did he perceive. Instead of hope appearing like the uprising of the dawn, rather did it begin to appear like the shadows of the setting sun, presently to merge into irrepressible gloom.

Alternately buoyed up by confidence and dis-

couraged by doubt, he at length decided to make a meal while the freshly arrived tea was quite warm ; and then he sought the comfort of his rude couch. Only in sleep was there freedom from the conflict of his hopes and fears. But there remained dreams that, while they marked no lapse of time, might still bring tortures to the mazes of his distracted fancy.

It was nine o'clock when Charlie awoke. He pushed the hook out in hope that he might again come in contact with that frail cord, which seemed yet a link to bind him to the outside world. He met only with disappointment, and very shortly he lay down again with prayers upon his lips for Peggy's safety, for Mary and Belle and Tom's comfort, and for his own speedy deliverance.

Thursday was a repetition of Wednesday. Food and drink came down into the depths twice—about seven in the morning and three o'clock in the afternoon. There were now only two candles left, and the prisoner decided to be less prodigal in their use. He would put out the light while he slept. To be robbed of the means of light while he was awake was too harrowing a possibility to contemplate. If for no other reason than this, he slept more than he did on Wednesday.

It was ten o'clock at night, and Charlie was awake, reflecting that he had now been immured in the mine for two whole days—forty-eight long wearying hours.

Bump!

'What was that?'

Charlie sprang into instant alertness, his ears straining to catch some additional sound that would disclose the origin of the noise.

'Put that glim out.'

He recognized it was the same voice which he had heard early on Wednesday morning.

For a moment he felt inclined to refuse. It might mean that he was about to be attacked—perhaps some dread sentence had been declared upon him, and in the darkness he would fall an easier prey to those who came to put it into effect. Upon the other hand, if no additional harm were meant, he would but anger his jailers, and possibly be deprived of one or more of his few comforts, if such a term could be applied to any feature of his situation. He therefore blew out the light.

Outside the hut he could hear movements. Through the hole he could perceive a faint light. He hesitated whether to approach nearer and look out, but in the moment of his indecision the faint illumination disappeared. Next he heard a stealthy movement in the neighbourhood of the door. Then there was silence for the space of quite a minute; doubtless to the captive it appeared to be an hour. An inrush of cold air told him that the door was open; but his visitor—or was it visitors?—never spoke. Charlie stood perfectly motionless, preparing to sell

his life as dearly as bare fists would serve him. A moment later footsteps told him that he was not alone.

The door was banged, and a bolt shot home. Suddenly there was a scream. It was the voice of a girl. It sounded like the despairing shriek of a lost soul in torment. There was something in the sound of it that froze Charlie's blood with horror. He still held the candle in his hand. He struck a match and before the wick caught its flame, he found himself looking into the affrighted eyes of—Belle!

Brother and sister gazed at each other in horrified amazement for a moment in this dramatic meeting, and the next, the girl was in his arms sobbing in mingled joy and grief—joy at the discovery that he was alive, grief at his predicament, in which she now shared.

Presently when Belle had recovered a little of her composure, Charlie informed her of the circumstances connected with his disappearance and his bestowal in the mine.

Belle on her part had a longer story to relate. She told her brother of the search for him; the suspicions that he had absconded; the repayment of the club money by Mary; and the numerous rumours to which his absence had given rise.

'But how came you here?' asked her brother.

Belle entered into an explanation of how a boy

came to Textile Row with a tiny scrap of paper in an envelope. He said his father had found it on Peggy's leg, and as the bird had been absent from his pen for some days, he thought he had again been back to Textile Row. Mary and Tom had gone to Manchester and Belle was alone. She opened the envelope and at once gathered the import of the tiny, brief message. Without a moment's thought she had set out for Longpike Pit, intending to shout down the shaft and then summon help.

Belle reached the mouth of the old mine. She had only called out her brother's name once when she was accosted by a man, who asked her the object of her visit to the shaft at that time of night—it was about eight o'clock. She had no sooner informed him that she knew Charlie was down the mine than he clapped his hand over her mouth, and carried her into a little hovel close at hand. Her struggles were useless to prevent him binding, blindfolding, and gagging her, and then he left her for quite a long time. When he returned he was accompanied by another individual. She could not see him, but she heard his voice—he was as hoarse as a crow.

Charlie remembered that voice. He heard it when his fist crashed into the face of one of the men who had attacked him.

Only a few minutes ago the girl had been carried out of doors again—the cold night air assured her of the fact. Then she felt herself sinking down—

down. She was again lifted up in a man's arms and carried a few yards. With a knife he had cut the cords that bound her ; he had whisked the bandage off her eyes and the gag out of her mouth ; and then she had screamed.

'Never mind, old girl,' said Charlie, 'there will be two to rescue now. We shan't have to wait very long.'

'But they won't know where to come,' urged Belle. 'I told nobody, and I've got the paper in my pocket.'

CHAPTER XXI

SURPRISE UPON SURPRISE

'GOT the paper in your pocket? Told nobody?' repeated Charlie dazedly. For a moment the full significance of his sister's statement scarcely dawned upon him. When it did, he could have wept.

His forlorn hope, the scheme in which his feathered ally was to play so invaluable a part, had worked admirably. And then Belle, in her loving desire to serve him, had stepped in to rob it of any efficacy.

They talked far into the night in the dark. With a companion in misery the absence of light was more tolerable. Now that the first excitement of meeting her brother was over, Belle was inclined to be hysterical, and Charlie had a difficulty in composing her and getting her off to sleep on the primitive pallet, which was all he was able to offer her.

On Friday morning just within the hut they found fresh food and drink. All through the day they alternately talked and slept. It was a terrifying experience for Belle, but her brother was glad that

she had not known the unspeakable horror of solitary confinement.

'Friday night! Christmas Eve,' soliloquized Charlie, 'the season of jollity and goodwill and charity to all men!'

Bump! Bump! Thud!

Something had dropped outside the hut with a sound that caused him a feeling of sickness. He was glad that Belle was dozing and had not heard it. He lighted the candle and looked outside, but could perceive nothing save the everlasting blackness. He blew it out and sat down upon the box.

For some minutes he sat trying to imagine what lay outside the hut. All at once he sprang into startled alertness. He heard a voice—voices—followed by another bump such as had signalized the unsuspected arrival of Belle.

The voices outside were raised. He approached the window and looked out. The sight that met his eyes filled him with a glad surprise that for a second robbed him of speech and nearly of feeling. There were at least three men—two of them were policemen—bending down over something which he could not distinguish.

'Help! Help!' he shouted.

Exclamations escaped the constables and their companion, as they looked up to see Charlie's white, strained face framed in the square hole just above their heads.

Up to that moment their attention had been directed to the object at their feet.

'Aw'm jiggered!' cried Clem Smith with a jump. 'It's owd Chawlie reet enuff. Eh, lad! whot's way into thet theer rabbit 'utch. By gum! Sombry 'ull ha' tew sit oop for this. Berryin' foak aloive, th' bad bobbins!'

While he spoke, his companions were at the door unlocking it and taking down the bar with which it was further secured. They threw it open and shone their lanterns into the hut, to find not only Charlie Farleigh but his sister also—the two persons whose names were seldom off the lips of all in Spindleton.

Charlie stood motionless and said nothing. The glorious certainty that he was free was quite enough for him at that moment of surprise upon surprise. Belle simply collapsed; the reaction proved too much for her strength. She just moaned, and would have fallen but for the saving hand of one of the policemen. Then Charlie found his tongue.

'Thank heaven you've come!' he said, with a grateful look that included their three rescuers. Clem had taken hold of his arm, and Charlie leaned heavily against him.

'All right, lad,' said Sergeant Hartley. 'We'll get you up to the top, and then you'll have a story to tell, I reckon. There's nobody else down here, is there?'

Charlie shook his head, not so much in negation, as to intimate that he did not know. He did not think it probable anybody else was in the old mine, but he would not be astonished at anything in connexion with it. He did not believe that he would ever again feel the sensation of surprise.

Clem Smith whispered to the sergeant, who nodded in answer to his whispered communication.

'Yes,' he said. 'It'll be just as well. They've had enough horrors to last them for a bit.'

He picked up three or four of the old sacks that were lying upon the straw, and passed outside. A minute later he called to them to join him at the immediate bottom of the shaft. Charlie's eyes sought the ground. He could see a heap carefully covered with the sacks.

'What is that?' he asked.

'Nawthin' much,' replied Clem, very quietly, and then commencing hurriedly to speak of something else to divert attention and prevent further questions.

Smith's answer was intentionally diplomatic, but nevertheless more truthful than he imagined. The heap had been a man, but after a fall of seven or eight hundred feet, dashing from one side to the other of the brick-lined shaft, and ending with a terrible crash at the bottom, what remained of him was—'nawthin' much.'

Into the big bucket-like skip stepped Charlie, Belle and Sergeant Hartley. It would not hold all

the party, and would have to return for the constable and Clem Smith.

On the surface awaited a group of more than a dozen persons. There were Mary and Tom Farleigh, the Reverend Ambrose Davenant and Mr. Forster, Ned Gorman and another mill-hand; the others were policemen, some in uniform and others without.

When Inspector Stimson received the vicar's telephonic message he simply warned the clergyman not to let the information leak out, so that the police could descend upon Longpike Pit without any warning to those who might be watching the spot.

The police drew a cordon around the shaft and then gradually closed in upon it. Their caution was justified. Suddenly out of the hovel sprang two figures, one darting in one direction and one in another. The first one effected his escape, but the second was headed off by a couple of constables. He raced back towards the shaft with his pursuers close at his heels, while two lanterns shone upon him from the right and the left. Three sides of the pit were surrounded by a low fence, which the pursued took with a flying leap. He cleared the dark gaping hole, but as his hands seized the top bar of the fence it came away in his clasp. In the light of half a dozen lanterns that were directed upon him the policemen saw the man stagger backwards, clutching at the empty air, as with a shriek he disappeared into the dark depths below.

Even the policemen were horrified at the sudden tragedy. The man had escaped their jurisdiction only to be hurried into the presence of the great Judge of all. It had happened so quickly that none of them had been able to identify him in the uncertain light of the lanterns.

It was while the men were conversing for a moment that Mary and her friends arrived.

'Have you got them?' asked she tremulously.

'No,' replied a constable. 'One got off and the other has just tumbled down the shaft.'

He directed his lantern towards her face. He saw a spasm of agony pass into her features, and gathered her misunderstanding.

'Nobody belonging to you, miss,' he explained quickly. 'They won't want to run away when they see us. No fear.'

'It was foolish of me,' said Mary to Mr. Davenant, 'but—but——'

The clergyman pressed her arm encouragingly. No wonder the girl's nerves were on edge.

The policemen were searching the hovel, and inspecting the windlass arrangement. It was in good working order as though it had been recently used. Longpike Pit was one that had not been inspected when Rough Hills was searched for Charlie. The shaft was covered over with thick planks, which precluded the possibility of anybody

falling down it. They were no longer in position, but were stacked up on the bank.

'What are you going to do, Mr. Stimson?' asked the vicar.

'I'll send three men down,' was the reply, 'as soon as we are quite sure the windlass is safe. We don't want another accident, sir,' he added.

Clem Smith, as a friend of Charlie's, and one who had been indefatigable in his efforts to find him, pleaded to be allowed to descend. The inspector consented, and named the two policemen to accompany him. And presently the skip sank out of sight, leaving those on the bank in a state of painful excitement, nay, positive dread on the part of Mary and Tom. They could not remove their eyes from the yawning hole; they could not help speculating with what dreadful result the search might end.

It seemed a year before the wire rope was tugged from below to show they were getting ready to ascend. Then came the prearranged signal to draw up. Willing hands were bent to the crank, and slowly the rope was wound upon the revolving drum.

Every available lantern was focused upon the pit-mouth, and into the circle of light at length appeared three heads. Probably Sergeant Hartley recognized that he was of little importance, but he was nevertheless a proud man if only that he was in the picture.

What a scene was there the next minute! Half a dozen pairs of hands were extended to assist

Charlie and Belle out of the skip—the sergeant smiled at the manner in which he was neglected—and in a moment the four Farleighs were hugging and kissing each other in a wild abandon of delirious happiness, that brought tears to the eyes of even the usually stolid and impassive officers of the law.

Staying only a moment to express their thanks to the policemen, the Farleighs and their friends were shortly wending their way over the pit mounds. Mary was hanging on to Charlie; Tom supported Belle with his arm around her waist; and the minister and Mr. Forster, at a discreet distance, brought up the rear.

'It is Christmas Eve, Charlie!' whispered Mary. 'Oh! what a gloriously happy Christmas after all!'

'And good old Peggy is Santa Claus,' replied her brother. 'If that Loombridge chap won't sell the bird back to me, I shall steal him.'

Spindleton was already thrilling with excitement. Rumour on the wings of the wind had swept through the town to fetch the inhabitants out into the streets. The busy night was practically at an end, and having completed their shopping in readiness for the auspicious morrow most of the folks were back at home, and in many cases they had retired to rest. The news that was being shouted from mouth to mouth caused them hastily to dress, and join the evergrowing crowds that filled the thoroughfares in the neighbourhood of the Mission Hall.

Charlie and Belle Farleigh were acclaimed as though they had returned from the dead; and Hargreaves Street was filled from end to end with a shouting, gesticulating crowd, through which it was difficult to force a passage to number sixteen.

When at length the door was opened and they entered the little front room, only the minister and Mr. Forster accompanied them.

Tom stooped down and picked up a letter that had come by the special Christmastide late delivery, while they had been absent from home.

Mr. Davenant very feelingly expressed his pleasure at the comparatively happy ending of what they had feared was a tragedy. Of course the mystery still remained to be cleared up, to which that mutilated body at the bottom of the shaft would doubtless afford a certain clue. The fact remained that Charlie and Belle were safe—and Christmas had arrived. A church clock had just chimed the four quarters and the bells were clanging out their joyous welcome to the happy season—and nowhere could it possibly be happier than in 16 Textile Row.

While the minister was speaking Mary was abstractedly opening the letter.

She suddenly gave a startled gasp and dropped it as though she were shot. She had withdrawn the enclosure to find that it contained six five-pound notes!

CHAPTER XXII

BETRAYED BY A VOICE

IT was long past eleven o'clock on Christmas Eve, and Mr. Jarrocks, ill at ease, sat in front of the fire. There was a bottle of whisky and a syphon of soda-water on the table at his elbow, but if he troubled the latter it was but sparingly.

What a day! That prying barrister from London! How was the manager likely to guess that the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers would cable some additional particulars to his friend? What had become of Mr. Forster? He had gone into the George Hotel, and Midgley was prepared to swear that he never came out. Yet cautious inquiry elicited the fact that the gentleman was not staying there. That seemed to suggest that the lawyer had some scheme afoot for the disclosure of which there was nothing to do but wait.

Disconcerting as was the visit of Mr. Forster, the manager accounted it nothing compared to the blunder of Gipsy Matthews and his brother. The capture and detention of Charlie Farleigh having failed in its purpose, it had become necessary to

release him. Before instructions could be given to effect it, the brothers Matthews must go and complicate matters, instead of at once realizing that the game was up. One of the gipsies had decamped and the other had got 'gloriously' drunk. Mr. Jarrocks cursed the hour that he had allowed himself to be persuaded by Jobson to utilize the services of as pretty a pair of rascals as could be found outside any jail.

Jobson had assured him that the visit of Matthews to the stable was not likely to lead to trouble, even if inquiries were made. It could be stated that he did but come concerning some question of horse-dealing.

Well, Jobson and the gipsy had now gone to Longpike Pit to bring the prisoners up to the surface. Matthews would at once leave the neighbourhood, and the groom would return to the stables by devious ways, that would afford him every chance of returning home unperceived. Of course the return of the Farleighs would prove a nine days' wonder; but there was no reason why suspicion should be directed towards Jarrocks. In any case surmise was not proof, and if necessity called upon him he would have to brazen it out as well as he could.

The scheme had not only proved to be a failure, but the expenses were totalling up to an unexpected figure. The robbing of the victim had been expressly forbidden; but thirty pounds in the pocket

of an unconscious man had proved too big a temptation to one of the rascals. It might, however, serve a good purpose in that the thief was likely to give the district a very wide berth in future.

Mr. Jarrocks sighed, as he concluded that he was a very much ill-used man. Only a couple of hours ago he had forwarded thirty pounds to Mary Farleigh in an envelope addressed in the shaky, ill-written hand of Gipsy Matthews.

Although this present plot had failed, he did not intend to give up his pursuit of Mary Farleigh. He might yet evolve some plan to overcome her scruples, before the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers could return to dash his hopes to the ground for ever. At the moment he could conceive no scheme likely to assist him to achieve his end; but with the confidence of the gambler he trusted that luck would presently come to his aid.

He poured out a stiff glass of spirits to assist his inspiration; he was raising it to his lips, when there was a tap at the window. He was so startled that he spilt half the liquid in setting down the glass upon the table. He walked across the room and drew aside the blind to meet the affrighted face of Jobson. His eyes were more blobby than ever; in fact they were starting from his head. His pasty complexion had developed a ghastly hue and his ugly lips were trembling.

Mr. Jarrocks opened the window and Jobson

literally fell inside the room. He was in a pitiable state of exhaustion and fright. No words were needed to tell the manager that some fresh trouble awaited him.

'Have you done it?' he demanded.

'No,' replied the groom. 'The police came down on us. I got away. I had to lie down in some freezing water for quite twenty minutes. I daren't move a finger for fear I should be discovered. Gipsy made a dash for it, but was cornered. He turned back and tried to leap over the shaft. He—he——'

'What?' interrogated Jarrocks, as he shook the groom by the shoulder.

'He jumped down the shaft,' said Jobson in little less than a moan. He shuddered as he added: 'I can still hear his scream.'

'Yes, yes!' interpolated the manager. Jobson's feelings were of no account to him. 'Did they spot you?'

'No,' said the man. 'While they were lowering some men down the pit I crawled away. I've come miles by a round-about road. I've run every inch and got here without meeting a soul.'

'Well, you fool, what's the matter with you? It seems to me nothing could have happened better,' said Jarrocks. 'Gipsy can't split; and nobody can suspect you. What else do you want?'

That was an aspect that had not occurred to the groom. A look, almost a smile, of crafty satisfac-

tion, entered his disfavoured physiognomy. So long as his own precious skin was safe he need not trouble himself concerning the fate of his erstwhile companion. He heaved a sigh of relief and looked longingly at the bottle of spirits. His master interpreted the glance and nodded to him to help himself. He needed no second invitation; he poured out half a glassful and tossed it off as though it had been water.

Exhibiting much more composure than upon his arrival, Jobson conversed with his master for another fifteen minutes, and then retired to his quarters over the harness room. Mr. Jarrocks intended to follow his example, but postponed it until he had mixed himself another drink, and another to follow it. He then concluded it was far less trouble to fall asleep in his chair than to risk a walk along the hall and up a flight of rather steep stairs.

When he awoke, or rather when his housekeeper awoke him, on Christmas morning, he keenly desired to learn that portion of the story which succeeded the details he had learnt from Jobson. Mrs. Meggit had already received quite a long account from the milkman; and she proceeded to repeat his story with a wealth of unconscious exaggeration that filled her master with quiet satisfaction.

It was popularly supposed that Charlie Farleigh had been captured by a gang of Anarchists or Fenians, tempted by the money he carried, which would prove

a welcome addition to their funds. Down in the mine they had intended to keep him a prisoner, engaged in the preparation of explosives, with which to carry on a campaign of violence in different parts of the country. Why Belle had been selected as a victim was less clear ; but lack of information upon the point might be taken as only a proof of the cunning of the miscreants. The police had got one of them, but as his face was smashed utterly beyond recognition it was quite probable that the body would render justice no useful service.

At midday Mr. Jarrocks walked down to the George Hotel. He could not go earlier, as, owing to it being Christmas Day, Sunday in the eye of the licensing law, the house was not opened until half-past twelve. There he learnt the only few reliable facts that the police had allowed to become public property. He could glean nothing concerning what he most particularly desired to know. How had the police been put upon the track ? That was a question that at present the authorities were not prepared to answer.

Mr. Jarrocks had been considering how he ought to treat the Farleighs, or rather, how the public would consider he ought to treat them. He decided to pay an immediate visit to Textile Row to condole with Charlie upon his experience, and to congratulate him upon his escape from what might have been grave peril. Incidentally he would possibly

gather some additional facts to mould his further attitude.

Charlie received him. He was very pale, but otherwise appeared really little the worse for his unnerving adventure. He did not appear to be particularly grateful for the manager's friendly visit. The young man's demeanour, indeed, was one of marked aloofness, if not of actual resentment.

'You don't appear to be in a very friendly humour,' protested Mr. Jarrocks. 'Naturally this business upset me a great deal. First there was everybody clamouring for me to take out a warrant against you for absconding with the club funds; in fact, during my absence Bilter very nearly did it. Then there was——'

'I know quite sufficient about your attitude,' broke in Charlie. 'The least you say about it the better.'

'I should like to see your sister just to express my——'

'She's busy,' interrupted Charlie.

The cheeks of Mr. Jarrocks flushed a brick red.

'I think considering my official connexion with you that you might be a little more communicative,' said he. 'For example, what lucky chance was it that the police got upon your trail?'

'Inspector Stimson forbids us to discuss it until after the inquest to-morrow,' replied Farleigh. 'He hopes to lay somebody by the heels. I can tell you,

though, that I put the police on my own track. I sent word to Mary where I was being detained.'

The red died out of the manager's cheeks. He tried to look merely interested; but with Charlie's eyes fixing him, he felt that he was exhibiting more perturbation than curiosity.

'But—but—how did you send word?' he almost faltered.

Charlie enjoyed his mystification.

'I sent her a note,' he replied.

'Ah! now I understand,' said Jarrocks. 'You bribed one of the rascals who had captured you.' He simply hung upon the young man's answer.

'I bribed nobody. Unknown to them I had a friend with me down in the mine. He delivered the message. That's all I'm going to say about the matter.'

His decision was unnecessary. Mr. Jarrocks did not propose to ask any further questions. He had got quite sufficient to occupy his mind for some time to come. He must see Jobson at the earliest possible moment and make inquiry into this astounding development.

Two minutes later he was thoughtfully walking in the direction of his own home; and Charlie was relating to Mary how he had puzzled 'old Jarrocks.'

Christmas Day at number sixteen, Textile Row, and at Holly Lodge, as the manager's residence was named, were in great contrast.

The Farleighs were happy beyond all words—the manager was morose and filled with the fear of impending trouble. Jobson could not explain Farleigh's reference to his friend, and there was the suggestion that the inquest would lead to an arrest. Jarrocks could think of nothing else but the inquest all day; he dreamt of it all night.

When upon Monday, however, the coroner's inquiry came to be held, it brought comfort to the mill manager and his unprepossessing satellite. The dead man remained un-identified, and a verdict of death by misadventure was duly recorded, leaving the police to continue their investigations concerning the robbery and abduction of Charlie Farleigh and his sister.

Nothing came out concerning that mysterious friend who had engineered Charlie's escape. Inspector Stimson simply stated that the police acted upon 'information received,' and which at that stage it was inadvisable to particularize. There the matter ended so far as that particular inquiry was concerned.

Another disquieting feature to Mr. Jarrocks was the fact that the Farleighs had not yet announced the receipt of the thirty pounds—restitution that showed robbery did not really enter into the abduction.

Boxing Day at length came to an end. In the afternoon there had been a big football match—a

cup tie between Spindleton and Loombridge—but popular interest in the exciting contest was almost swamped by the inquest and by the hundred and one puzzling features of the Christmastide mystery.

On Tuesday the mills were still idle, and the Spindleton folk largely occupied their time in discussing Charlie Farleigh's remarkable disappearance and still more dramatic return. But whichever way their thoughts trended, they always came to a cul-de-sac, beyond which it seemed impossible to penetrate.

On Tuesday night Charlie and Belle went out for a walk—they found it most inconvenient to go out by daylight, unless they liked to be accompanied by a crowd. They were crossing the market square, when they passed a group of men standing at the entrance to a public-house, into which several of the party were urging one of their number to accompany them. He excused himself on the plea that he was but out on an errand.

As his hoarse, croaking voice fell upon Belle's ears, she grasped her brother's arm with an intensity that was painful. For a moment Charlie stood perfectly rigid, the working of his face showing that he was strangely stirred. He edged nearer to the individual until he could discern his countenance. He just noted the general evil aspect of the ill-assorted features; there were green and yellow discolorations around his eyes. That, added to

the raucous voice, was sufficient for Charlie. The next moment he sprang upon him, and seizing him by the throat, bore him to the ground.

The horsey individual fought desperately, but he was no match for Farleigh, who, lithe and active, was swept by gusts of passionate anger, that gave him the strength of three ordinary men. The man regained his feet only to receive a blow that again sent him crashing to the pavement.

So sudden was the attack that the bystanders had no opportunity to interfere; but now restraining hands were laid upon Charlie, whom none of the party had recognized.

'Here, young mon, stiddy on. Yo'll kill 'im if tha a'nt keerful,' remonstrated a voice.

'Fetch a policeman,' Charlie jerked out, as he again threw himself upon the man who was attempting to rise. 'This is one of the blackguards who robbed me.'

CHAPTER XXIII

NEMESIS

WHEN Spindleton heard of the arrest of Joseph Jobson by Sergeant Hartley, it more than figuratively rubbed its eyes and scratched its head in amazement. It was useless to doubt the statement, for there were scores of persons upon the spot before the sergeant arrived to clap the handcuffs upon the groom. As a matter of fact at that moment the police were Jobson's best friends; it seemed for a few seconds that the crowd would deal out summary vengeance upon the head of the wretched man, notwithstanding his loud protestations of innocence.

William Jarrocks had no occasion for doubt upon the subject, for he happened to be returning from the railway station, just as the sergeant was escorting his prisoner to the lock-up with a constantly swelling crowd at their heels.

The mill manager wished to stay their progress while he sought an explanation; but the sergeant, and a couple of constables who had joined him, waved him aside. If he had anything to say, or anything to ask, he must perforce do it at the police-

station. Jarrocks fell in at their side, seeking for an opportunity to speak to Jobson. The chance only came as they forced their way through the crowd up the steps into the Town Hall, in the rear of which the police offices were situated; and even then it allowed nothing more than a mere whisper on the part of Jarrocks and a nod from Jobson. Whatever the purport of the brief communication, it caused the manager to breathe a sigh of relief.

The proceedings in the charge-room were brief in the extreme. Charlie and Belle Farleigh were prepared to swear to Jobson's voice; and the former pointed to the study in colours around the prisoner's eyes, where he had planted his knuckles exactly a week ago, when he was assailed in the darkness on Rough Hills.

Mr. Jarrocks ridiculed the idea that Jobson could possibly be implicated, and offered to find bail for any reasonable amount. Inspector Stimson, who was not on duty, but had happened to be in the police recreation room, firmly declined to accede to the request. That would be a matter for the magistrates to decide on Thursday.

Mr. Forster had stayed in Spindleton until after the inquest on the unknown man, who had met with so tragic a fate at Longpike Pit. The barrister and the minister had held several consultations, the details of which would have deeply surprised the

Farleighs, and would have caused more than disquietude to Mr. Jarrocks.

The friend of Mr. Ferrers was most unfavourably impressed by the demeanour of the mill manager from the first moment that he saw him. After he had had a conversation with Mr. Davenant, and learnt of Charlie's disappearance, and Mr. Jarrocks' attitude towards his sister, his nebulous suspicion grew apace. He had hoped the inquest would throw some light upon the motive of Charlie's detention, but as in that respect it proved to be entirely abortive, the barrister returned to Town, taking with him the numbers of the banknotes that Mary had received through the post.

Before he took his departure, he had one more long conversation with the clergyman concerning the Farleighs. On behalf of Mr. Ferrers he had to prosecute certain inquiries that would probably occupy much time, and perhaps lead to nothing tangible after all. In the meantime the Farleighs would go on very comfortably under the arrangements made by Mr. Ferrers on the eve of his sailing for America.

When his housemaid informed Mr. Davenant of the arrest of Jobson, the clergyman hastened round to Farleigh's. Mary could give him no information; she had only just heard the news from a neighbour. A few moments later in came Charlie and Belle to give a bald statement of fact, that differed greatly

from most of the stories that were current all over the town.

'Jobson protests his innocence and Mr. Jarrocks says he will have no difficulty in proving an alibi,' said Charlie. 'But,' he continued, 'if he were not out on Rough Hills last Tuesday night his voice was. And his eyes,' he added, 'carry the marks I gave him. A pretty sight he is, too. No wonder I knocked my wrist up.'

'Have you any reason to believe that he owed you a grudge?' asked Mr. Davenant.

'He couldn't possibly,' replied Charlie. 'To my knowledge I never saw him before to-night. Belle says she has seen him driving a trap, but she did not know that he was groom to Mr. Jarrocks.'

Late that night the clergyman wrote a long letter to Mr. Forster, telling him of the startling development of what the papers called the 'Rough Hills Mystery.' He now admitted that he was prepared to believe that the outcome would prove the correctness of certain conclusions to which the barrister had arrived before he left Spindleton.

Mrs. Davenant was looking over her husband's shoulder as he completed his letter.

'Oh, Ambrose!' she exclaimed. 'You do not think Mr. Jarrocks was really responsible for the outrage.'

'Suspicion certainly points that way, my dear,' replied he. 'Jarrocks must have purloined Mr.

Ferrers' letter, which would intimate to him certain perhaps rather remote possibilities concerning the Farleighs. In all probability he already desired to make Mary his own ; the letter would add cupidity to desire—and better men than William Jarrocks have not hesitated at crime to further their ends.'

The next evening the minister was not the least bit surprised when Mr. Forster was announced.

'I thought it was not unlikely my news last night would bring you to Spindleton ; but I scarcely expected to see you so soon,' said the clergyman as they shook hands.

Mr. Forster looked at him inquiringly.

'Your news ?' he said. 'I have heard nothing. I left Town early this morning, but broke my journey at Manchester. I've brought some information though,' he added.

'Last night,' Mr. Davenant commenced, 'Farleigh met one of his assailants in the town, seized him, and handed him over to the police.'

'Yes, yes !' exclaimed Mr. Forster. 'Who is he ?'

'Joseph Jobson, Mr. Jarrocks' groom,' replied the clergyman. 'It probably points to the implication of his master, though it may be difficult to prove.'

'Not so very difficult,' affirmed the barrister. I have been able to trace those six five-pound notes to Mr. William Jarrocks !'

Mr. Davenant stroked his chin reflectively.

HE FELL SPRAWLING IN THE ROADWAY.

(*see page* 252)

'That is almost sure evidence, if not of complicity, of being accessory after the fact,' said he slowly.

'I believe he conceived the whole scheme for the purpose of terrorizing the girl into a marriage with him,' replied Mr. Forster. 'Anyhow he is in the business up to his neck, and he must get out of it as best he can.'

'Do you intend to confront him with the evidence concerning the notes?' asked the clergyman.

'I shall at once give the proof to the police and press them to issue a warrant for his arrest. That is what I intend to do,' said the barrister determinedly.

It was not until nine o'clock that Mr. Forster laid his information against the mill manager. More than once Inspector Stimson looked across at a man, with whom he was in close conversation when the gentleman was ushered into his office.

'I think, sir, we are getting on rapidly now,' said the inspector. 'Detective Smedley'—the inspector nodded in the direction of his companion—'has just come in after making a thorough search of the stables and the groom's quarters at Holly Lodge. On a ledge in the hayloft he has found a pair of earrings, plain gold wire circlets.' He emphasized his next words with movements of his uplifted forefinger. 'The man who fell down the shaft had his ears pierced.'

'You will issue a warrant, of course,' said Mr. Forster.

'I was writing it out when you came in,' replied the official. 'It can be signed by a magistrate in a very few minutes and issued immediately.'

At that very moment Mr. Jarrocks was upon the platform at Manchester awaiting the train for Spindleton. Had he but known how fate was conspiring against him, he would have taken the earliest train in an opposite direction. All unsuspectingly, however, he took his seat in a first-class compartment, little dreaming of the rude shock that was lying in wait for him.

Lying back in the corner he gave himself up to thinking of the ordeal that awaited him on the morrow. Jobson would be standing in the dock, and his master would be upon the rack during the whole course of the proceedings. He had engaged one of the best advocates in the county to defend his servant, whom he had promised £250 if he would refuse to turn King's evidence. Reflection brought him little consolation. He knew Jobson too well to imagine that any reliance could be placed upon his courage or his promises.

Arrived at Spindleton, Jarrocks elected to walk home, instead of taking a cab as he usually did. Before very long he would be congratulating himself upon that apparently very immaterial decision.

He walked on through the town towards the

suburb where he resided. As he passed the street leading to the Town Hall he thought a constable stared very hard at him. He cursed himself for an easily alarmed fool ; but his nerves were not soothed a couple of minutes later, when he assured himself that the policeman was following him at a distance. Once when a pedestrian accidentally brushed his sleeve it gave him quite a shock. But that he had now left the public-houses behind him he would have taken a drink to pull himself together. If only he met a cab, he would hail it to expedite his arrival at Holly Lodge.

At last he turned into the road in which his house was—the only one upon the left-hand side.

He was skirting the wall, beyond which lay his kitchen garden, when he became aware of a four-wheeler drawn up in the shadow.

'Have you got a match, guv'nor?' asked the driver, who was standing by his horse.

'Yes,' replied Jarrocks holding out a box. 'Here's a cigar as well.'

The man took neither. He stepped closer.

'I didn't know it was you, Mr. Jarrocks,' he whispered. 'Take my tip and don't go home. Two 'tecs' come down in my car. They've gone to your house and I'm waiting here for them.'

Jarrocks stood stunned for a moment. He recognized that in some unforeseen way the blow had fallen. In all probability that hound Jobson had

'blabbed.' It served him right for having reposed any confidence in such an ugly jail-bird. Even in the midst of these reflections his mind was groping for inspiration. If he dared pass his house, beyond it the road was separated from the open fields only by a stout hawthorn hedge, and he knew where was the weakest spot in the leafy barrier. He looked down the road in the direction from which he had come. At the corner, in the light of a lamp, he could see the helmet of a policeman. He was thankful there were no lamps in the road itself. All this passed through his mind in a fraction of the time it takes to set it down.

'Thank you!' he said to the cabman, who happened to be one whom he very frequently employed. 'Good-night!' he added.

'Good-night, sir,' the man replied in a subdued tone, as the mill manager stepped out very quietly towards his own gate. When he reached it he could see that the front door of the house was open. In the hall stood a couple of men talking to the housekeeper. Jarrocks stole past on tip-toe, took a few hasty strides, and then broke into a run. He could hear footsteps in his rear as the constable gave chase, calling out to the detectives as he passed the house.

Turning to the left, Jarrocks, threw himself on his hands and knees and crawled through the hedge. Regaining his feet, he set off across the turf at the

best pace his heavily built figure would allow. By the time he had reached the fence at the far side of the meadow he was breathing heavily, his temples throbbed, his legs quaked under him. He dared allow himself no breathing space with those three sleuth-hounds on his track. Fortunately he knew the district well, and in the darkness he might be able to elude pursuit until he could reach—reach —for a moment his whirling brain refused to assist him—a village station quite two miles away. By crossing one more field he would reach the railway and then he would keep to the line. It would not only be nearer, but would allow less scope for going astray.

He scrambled over the fence, and in the six-foot he stumbled further on his way. He was nearly exhausted ; he mumbled to himself incoherently. Ahead of him he heard a dull noise, and presently he discerned two glaring eyes bearing down upon him. Nearer and nearer they came, and, in horrible fascination, he stood still to await the onslaught of some fierce monster that came thundering along in the blackness.

He turned to fly from it, only to find another pair of gleaming orbs of yet a second unknown destroyer approaching him from behind. His brain became a stone, his hands were numbed as if in an icy clasp. For a moment he lost grip of himself and his surroundings.

Alas! the moment became eternity.

With a scream Jarrocks moved aside to avoid the near contact of the first pair of glittering eyes, only to step in front of the Liverpool express as it crashed along at sixty miles an hour.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SCHOLARSHIP GIRL

ON Thursday morning Spindleton police-court was packed to its utmost capacity. It was common property that Mr. Jarrocks had met his death upon the railway less than a mile from the back of Holly Lodge. Already there were rumours that the accident or suicide, whichever it might be, was not unlikely to have an important bearing upon Jobson's case. The court was filled with the hum of subdued conversation.

A full bench of magistrates filed into their places; the ushers called for silence; the prisoner appeared in the dock from the steps below.

The prosecuting solicitor arose to ask for a remand. Mr. William Jarrocks had been cut to pieces on the railway the previous evening, and the prisoner, who had been in the employ of the deceased gentleman, was now prepared to make a full confession that would throw some astounding light upon the Rough Hills mystery. The magistrates consulted with each other for a few minutes, and then the Chairman announced that, subject to formal

evidence of arrest, the prisoner would be remanded for a week. It was a sore disappointment to the spectators, who could only console themselves with the thought that there were 'astounding' facts shortly to be made public.

They had not to wait longer than the inquest upon the body of William Jarrocks the next day. The inquiry differed from that on Monday, when the cause of death and the immediate reasons that led up to it were so very evident. In the case of William Jarrocks, it was necessary for the coroner to ascertain what brought him upon the line in an out-of-the-way spot at that time of night. There was now no reason to withhold any information to aid the cause of justice; and Detective Smedley replied readily enough that the deceased was being chased by the police, who sought to arrest him for being concerned in the attack upon Charlie Farleigh.

'Robbery with violence,' suggested the coroner.

The detective replied that there was every reason to believe that robbery had not entered into the scheme of the deceased. When he found that one of his tools had stolen the money, he immediately made restitution anonymously through the post. As the inquiry was concerned only with the cause of death there was no necessity to consider the motives which had prompted the plot; that aspect would receive full consideration in the police proceedings against

the prisoner Jobson. The coroner summed up, directing the jury to bring in a verdict of 'death by misadventure.' And this they did without leaving their seats.

On the next Court day Jobson made full confession and was committed to the Sessions; where in the course of a few weeks he was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment, a sentence that would have been much heavier but for the very obvious fact that he was acting under the instructions of his employer.

Justice sometimes moves slowly. In this case the sword had flashed from the sheath in relentless haste to destroy two men; while a third languished in jail, and a fourth never dared show himself again in his accustomed haunts.

In the meantime, however, Spindleton had settled down again to the—not quiet, but regular tenor of its way. It was fortunate, indeed, that the major part of the great excitement had practically been confined to a holiday period. Giant Cotton is very jealous of encroachment by outside matters that rob him of the strenuous attention of them that serve him.

Sometimes Mary Farleigh would give herself up to thoughts of those three days—from Tuesday to Friday night—when she supped the bitterest dregs of sorrow. Constantly she thanked God that her loved ones were restored to her; and in the

quiet happiness of her days she could find pity for the man who had caused her so much grief.

Charlie had resumed his attendance at the Manchester garage, and Tom, thanks to the fierce light of publicity into which he had been dragged, had been able to transfer himself to another mill, where the prospects of promotion were considerably better. Belle was back at school, grinding away with redoubled energy in view of the Scholarship examination which was due at the end of February.

The Farleighs were not sorry for their affairs to loom less largely upon the public horizon. They were tired of the constant visits of irrepressible newspaper men in search of copy, and of seeing their alleged portraits in the illustrated news-sheets. One journal that makes a special feature of the crimes of the week depicted Charlie in evening dress, when he was attacked by Jobson and the gipsies. Belle, instead of a mere schoolgirl, appeared as a young lady of eighteen or nineteen, dressed in the height of fashion, with a picture hat and high-heeled shoes and lingerie wonderful to behold. She was suspended by the wrists from a rope dangling over the pit mouth.

Charlie and Tom had collected a great number of these news pictures with which they had made a fair-sized scrap book. Mary had suggested that they be burnt; she would have preferred to keep nothing that would remind her of that terrible week.

'You've got nothing of which to complain,' said Charlie. 'You look like some princess in disguise. You're fairly good looking,' he admitted quizzingly, 'but you are not a society beauty yet.'

'Not even if your brother is motor-shover to one of the quality,' chimed in Tom. 'When are we going in that red car for a trial spin?' he asked. 'We shan't believe you can drive for nuts, if you don't hurry up.'

'Next Saturday,' replied Charlie.

'Not really?' cried Belle. 'You don't mean it?'

But he did mean it, as they found out when Mr. Ferrers' red car stood at their door. It was not to be supposed that the good folks of Hargreaves Street would exhibit no interest in it. The Farleighs to a great extent were viewed as public property, and the whole street turned out to make quaint comments and to send them off with good-natured cheers.

'Blaw me, Chawlie!' cried Clem Smith. 'Ha' yo' coom intew a fortin? Longpike must ha' bin a gowd moine. Mary an' Belle do' 'alf suit it, pon ma' wurd.' That same thought was in the mind of more than one in the crowd.

The car moved off, and the way in which Charlie negotiated the corner of the street showed that he had taken lessons in driving to excellent purpose.

As they scudded through the streets, the Far-

leighs were fully aware of the mild excitement they were causing. This was particularly the case in the market square. John Bilter was crossing it just as the car passed. Tom mockingly raised his cap to him with boyish impudence. The overseer not only stayed in his stride, but in his wonder took a step backwards. So sudden and unexpected was his movement that Charlie had to swerve to avoid running him down. As it was, the mudguard grazed his coat tails, and Bilter, in mortal fear of his life, lost his footing and fell sprawling in the roadway.

He scrambled to his feet and shook his fist after the retreating vehicle, for though Charlie had applied the brake, he took it off again when he ascertained that mud was the chief thing from which Bilter suffered.

'Aw'll hev th' law on him,' cried the discomfited overseer. 'Aw'll mak' him sit oop, him an' Miss Powsement, a doing' th' big an' tryin' to kill foaks i' th' street.'

'Stop yo're jawin' an' blatherin,' advised a bystander. 'Goo whoam an' hide yo' heid, an' let th' Farleighs a be.'

Bilter cast a look of annihilation at the man, who only laughed at him for his pains, as he commenced to add various further caustic remarks.

The overseer found that he was not likely to enlist the popular sympathy, and he slunk away

to escape the gibes with which he was being assailed upon all sides.

This motor expedition was but the first of many that the Farleighs enjoyed upon Saturday afternoons. And once Charlie drove the minister and Mr. Forster as far as Lancaster, just to show Mr. Ferrers' legal friend that he was master of nearly everything appertaining to motor-car knowledge.

Mary had been increasingly puzzled by Mr. Davenant's still closer inquiries into her mother and father's antecedents. He had begged the loan of her mother's love-letters and various memoranda to which the girl had hitherto attached but little importance. She had not cared to part with these treasured mementoes even temporarily. It was quite certain she would have entrusted them to nobody else but the minister, without first learning the particular object for which they were required.

Little did she guess how every scrap of paper was scrutinized, and in some cases copied, by Mr. Forster in the clergyman's study. Once, indeed, the barrister was shaken out of his ordinary composure. It was but a sentence in a letter to which he drew the clergyman's attention. With his finger upon the words he said—

'We are on the right track, I believe. If that one point can be verified, Kenyon will prove to be right. I'll go on as far as I can, but I am afraid we shall needs have to wait until he returns. There are

links on his side of the family which only he can supply.'

It would be useless to deny that Mary was curious to know what was in the clergyman's mind, especially when he bade her take the greatest care of her mother's little desk and its contents. Several papers he persuaded her to allow him to keep locked up in his safe.

'Only for a short time, my dear,' he said. 'They may mean nothing; they may count for a very great deal.'

But though the clergyman seemed afraid to say a word that would give rise to hopes, that perhaps could never be realized, Mary was quite certain there was a difference in the attitude of Mrs. Davenant towards her. The lady had always treated her with marked kindness, for the simple reason that she admired the girl for the sterling strength of character that had carried her through so many difficulties; but lately the minister's wife appeared to view her more and more as an equal, sometimes almost with a touch of deference.

Mary was not sorry when at length arrived the last day in February. For weeks nearly every waking minute Belle had pored over her books. The close application had taken the bloom out of her cheeks and painted dark marks under her eyes. It seemed almost impossible to doubt that she would gain one of the scholarships—even the usually pessi-

mistic Miss Brightwell admitted as much. But Belle had set her heart upon taking the plum of the girls' prizes—she desired to be the top scholarship girl, that she might proceed to St. Margaret's College at Westland-on-Sea.

On Monday afternoon commenced the test which was fraught with so much importance to the candidates, of whom there were thirty from Spindleton and district. Before the first paper was given out the competitors took stock of each other. Some of their capabilities were comparatively well known in the various schools; but there were still more candidates sitting at other centres in different parts of the county; and there was no telling what brilliant unknown opponents were arrayed against them.

There was, however, little time for reflections of this nature. In a few minutes, with thoughtful lines in their brows, the candidates were perusing the questions drawn up by the examining board. It was the English paper that was presented for their consideration. It immediately dawned upon some of the boys and girls how astonishingly little they knew of the literature of their country; some viewed the questions resentfully; and a few were filled with quiet satisfaction at finding the questions 'not half bad.' Belle Farleigh was in this last group, and shortly her pen was racing along the lines, of which to an examination candidate, a sheet of fools-

cap appears to contain such an inordinate number.

The examination occupied six half days; and at midday on Thursday, when the last paper was handed in, the candidates were heartily glad, whatever the outcome might be.

As the successful candidates were to enter their new schools at Easter, the results of the examination were to be announced as quickly as possible. Although Easter fell very late this year, little time would be left to fit out a scholarship girl in readiness to take up her life under entirely new conditions, and in an environment to which she was unaccustomed.

About a fortnight had elapsed when John Bilter went home to his tea in a more than ordinarily bad temper. Mrs. Bilter and Maud perceived the storm signal, and fussed about the tea-table to make assurance doubly sure that everything he would require lay ready to his hand.

'Doan't yo' come pokin' round me, yo' young powsement,' said he suddenly to Maud, 'or happen yo'll foind Aw's got summat on th' stick fo' yo'.'

Accustomed as she was to his uncertain humours, the girl could not repress her surprise at this blunt and unprovoked announcement. She inherited too much of his own temper to take the outburst meekly.

'I've done nothing to make you so horridly unfair to me,' she retorted. Her mother looked her agreement with the protest.

'It's noan whot tha's done; it's what tha' anna done,' he replied sourly.

Mother and daughter looked at him inquiringly.

'Aw reckon yo' anna won one o' they scholarships,' he continued.

'You know I haven't,' replied Maud with a hot flush in her cheeks. 'You know I moved to another school and spoilt my chance this year.'

'That wench o' Farleigh's anna spoilt nawthin',' he answered. 'Hoo's top gel; hoo's won hands daan.'

CHAPTER XXV

ST. MARGARET'S

ST. MARGARET'S College was perched up on a little promontory that formed one of the horns of the sand-fringed bay. As far back as the Middle Ages it had been a famous convent. It flourished until the myrmidons of Henry VIII descended upon the quiet spot to rob the building of the treasures accumulated during the passage of the centuries; its revenues were transferred to the Crown; the gentle nuns were dispersed to find homes in the few retreats that were left to them.

Portions of the old-time pile, weather-worn and ivy-grown, still remained in proof of past splendours, to which had been added modern buildings replete with every convenience that marks the well equipped educational establishments of the present age.

Miss Vaughan, the Principal of St. Margaret's, sat in her study, interviewing one at a time the several new scholars, who were entering the college at the commencement of the term. She was not a little anxious concerning the scholarship girl. It was an entirely new departure, this admission of a

pupil out of a walk of life so different from that which St. Margaret's had hitherto drawn her daughters. It was an experiment that might possibly present unpleasant features; there would be the social prejudices of the scholars against the newcomer, who, it was not unlikely, would be guilty of gaucheries that would be certain to offend the tender susceptibilities of the girls, who had been reared in an air of refinement from their birth.

What, for example, would be the verdict of the Honourable Hilda Jordan, the niece of Lord Fallowfield, to find herself entering St. Margaret's in company with a mill-hand, or at least a daughter of people who only by some happy chance had escaped being sacrificed to the cotton Juggernaut?

The lady's reflections were interrupted by the entrance of a new scholar—there remained only Miss Jordan and Belle Farleigh to present themselves. She looked up with a smile at the newcomer. This girl with the ruddy golden locks framing a face in which every feature was wellnigh perfect, could be none other than Miss Jordan. Poor relation of the Fallowfields she might be, but 'patrician' was written on every line of the sweet young face. If she were dressed more soberly than the Principal would have expected, she accounted it but a proof of the refinement that scorns any marked outward semblance of high station.

The lady pointed to a chair by her side as she

expressed the hope that the girl had had a pleasant journey.

'Let me fill in your particulars,' she said, dipping her pen and holding it in readiness over an admission form. 'Your full name, please.'

'Isabel Farleigh!'

Miss Vaughan nearly dropped the pen in her surprise. She stared at the new scholar with open amazement. It was only when she noted the look of wonder in the girl's eyes that she recollected herself.

'I beg your pardon,' she said. 'I thought—I mean, I was expecting some one else.'

Even as she spoke she was reflecting that, though the girl from Spindleton might be an anomaly, she possessed more than an average share of ladylike attributes.

When she came to converse with her, she was still more frankly surprised at Belle's bearing. She led the girl to talk of her home life, and long before she had concluded, she found herself deciding to do everything in her power to smooth the path of the scholarship girl.

Later, when the Honourable Hilda presented herself, the Principal was equally surprised, but in an altogether different direction. In looks she was but ordinary—very ordinary, Miss Vaughan decided. In other respects she was extraordinary. She wore a stand-up masculine-looking collar and a flaring tie with a silver horseshoe and whip for a pin.

If she looked 'sporty' her speech was in strict keeping.

'St. Margaret's seems rather a jolly sort of crib,' she gushingly confided to the Principal. 'It's no end of a swank over Pentonville.' She saw Miss Vaughan's start of surprise, and with a laugh explained: 'Penton Priory School I mean. I always called it Pentonville, because it was as slow as a jail. If it hadn't been for the hockey team it would have been as slow as a cemetery. Oh, yes!' she assured the lady, 'Penton hockey is simply rippin'. We just laid out every team we met. I believe we could have knocked spots off many a boys' team. We——'

Miss Vaughan found herself drawing comparisons between the Honourable Hilda and the soberly-dressed, quiet-voiced girl who had preceded her. Her conclusions were wholly unfavourable to the former, whom she interrupted suddenly. She was unacquainted with the methods in vogue at Penton Priory; if the discipline were as lax as the speech of Miss Jordan, then Miss Vaughan concluded she was glad that St. Margaret's must be accounted slow. The young lady might as well be brought at once to realize that its Principal had a rooted objection to dislocations of the King's English.

'I am afraid we do not specialize on hockey,' she said. 'We have a hockey team, of course. All the girls play tennis, and many of them are capital

swimmers ; a few even play cricket.' She hesitated a moment, and then added, in a voice that carried an accent of reproof : 'But we do not lay anybody out, or knock spots or anything else off them. We play our games in a perfectly legitimate and lady-like manner, accepting defeat with all the grace of good sportswomen.'

The Honourable Hilda perceived that she was being lectured in the first few moments of her arrival. She did but make a grimace to herself, mentally stigmatizing Miss Vaughan as an 'ancient stick,' whom she would shake out of her gloom before she was very much older.

By the end of the next day the girls had settled down to the ordinary routine. Belle was delighted with everything. When the college bell clanged out at seven o'clock in the morning she was fully dressed ; some of the girls thought it an atrociously early hour to rise, but the scholarship girl was thankful it was not an hour and a half earlier to be followed by a scurry to a mill instead of down to the chapel for prayers.

A short period of 'prep' paved the way for breakfast in the great Hall at eight-thirty. After the morning meal there was a pause until nine-thirty, when commenced the lessons of the day, only to be broken by the midday meal, with forty-five minutes' recreation to follow. Afternoon school ended at four-thirty ; tea was at five. In the evening the

students prepared their lessons in their own house studies, to each of which in the junior forms four girls were allocated—in the senior forms there were never more than two.

Just as Miss Vaughan had feared, there were certain cliques who made a dead set against Belle Farleigh. Though there was nothing of which she could take official cognizance, more than once she saw the girl's lips quiver at some studied slight, not infrequently taking the form of altogether ignoring her.

Had it been a question of a scholarship boy the matter would have been entirely different. Prowess at sport, or may be recourse to his fists, would have solved the major part of his difficulties within twenty-four hours. A girl could only trust to time for her inherently good qualities to be recognized by her schoolfellows.

So far as her own attainments were concerned Belle was far in advance of any other scholar of her age. That was but a very natural result of the severe preparation she had undergone to secure admittance into St. Margaret's. If out of school a few of the girls treated her with disdain, she was often able in class to make them look very small by the way in which she piled up marks over their heads.

By the end of May, however, Belle had secured a half-dozen of very nice girl friends, and their companionship, and the games, and a real devotion to study filled her life very completely.

One day towards the end of May she received a letter from Mary that contained more than ordinarily good news. Mr. Ferrers had returned from America, when Belle had been at St. Margaret's but a fortnight. Her sister's letters had made frequent references to his presence in Spindleton, and the genial master he made for Charlie, who was now a fully qualified chauffeur. Better still, the Alabama had now changed hands. Mr. Ferrers was the new proprietor, and Charlie was to re-enter the mill to learn every department of the work that would in the course of time qualify him for the post of manager.

There was an undefinable air about the letter that seemed to breathe infectious happiness, but Belle could not have explained why it should suffuse her with unalloyed content. She was reading it for the twentieth time in a quiet corner of the quadrangle, when the Honourable Hilda Jordan passed her with a supercilious stare. Out of pure lightness of heart Belle laughed and mimicked her air of superiority. At the moment she would not have cared for the scorn of a princess of the blood.

Miss Jordan stopped dead. She could scarcely believe that this interloper, this nobody, was openly laughing in derision at her. Even had there been no such gulf between their social positions, Belle was her junior, and would have to be taught better

manners. She marched straight up to her to give her the first necessary lesson.

'Just listen to me, Miss Farleigh,' she commenced, 'while I tell you a few plain truths that may knock a sense of decency even through your thick skin.'

Belle viewed this outburst with mild surprise. It was the first time that Miss Jordan had deigned to address her. Now that she had broken silence, it did not seem to augur any very great pleasure.

'It doesn't seem to have occurred to you,' continued the elder girl, 'that you are only here on sufferance, and that nobody is likely to put up with any impudence from you.'

'I suppose you are an authority on impudence,' remarked Belle, with an assumption of innocence.

'I'm an authority on what is expected from scallywags, for whom County Councils are fools enough to pay college fees,' retorted Miss Jordan hotly.

Any glint of amusement died out of Belle's face.

'I understand,' she said. 'Only those who can afford to pay the fees should dare to aspire to an education at St. Margaret's.'

'You understand me quite rightly,' said Hilda.

'You would rule County Councils out?' asked Belle, anxious to pin her opponent down to a definite declaration of her belief.

'That is exactly what I mean,' acknowledged Miss Jordan.

'Would you rule a rich aunt out?' persisted Belle quietly.

'What do you mean by that?' asked Hilda as a wave of crimson swept up into her cheeks. 'What do you mean, you—you——?'

In her anger she shook the younger girl roughly by the shoulder.

'I mean, I would rather owe my fees to the County Council, than be beholden even to an aunt. A scholarship isn't a charity, at any rate.'

Miss Jordan's hand dropped to her side. She had not anticipated this painfully direct *tu quoque* style of argument. Her colour changed from red to white.

The moment the words were out, Belle was filled with contrition; she was but emulating Miss Jordan's bad manners.

'I am sorry I repeated that,' she said. 'Please forget I said it; it's no business of mine who pays your fees.'

Hilda looked at her in puzzled fashion for a moment.

'Repeated?' she soliloquized. 'Sorry you repeated it? Then you must have heard somebody else say it. Who was it?' she asked aggrievedly.

'It wasn't said to me,' replied Belle. 'I only overheard some girls discussing what they called your "high and mighty manner" towards them.'

This was a terribly cold douche for Miss Jordan,

who racked her brains in order to fix the girl who knew sufficient of her private concerns to set afoot a discussion so inimical to her dignity. She was beginning to view the scholarship girl in rather a new light.

'I daresay you were precious glad to hear it,' she declared bluntly.

'I'm sure I wasn't,' Belle assured her. 'I have no wish to be on bad terms with anybody. I should like to be friends with every girl in the school.'

'You're too angelic for this world. You'll die jolly young,' replied Hilda with a return to her more natural self. 'I'd sooner die than be friends with some of 'em—stuck-up parvenus. They're only good housemaids spoilt. I'll perhaps be friend with you, though. I'll think about it.'

CHAPTER XXVI

A SENSATIONAL INTERRUPTION

WITH the advent of the warmer weather of June, life at St. Margaret's grew increasingly pleasant. The change of air from Spindleton to Westland-on-Sea had worked wonders for Belle Farleigh. Roses in her cheeks and the healthy tan of the sea air, supplied just the necessary touches to make her easily the beauty of the school. Though she scarcely ever gave it a thought, her mirror could not fail to tell the girl so much.

How she wished Mary could have a few weeks of real ozone to work a similar transformation in the clear-cut features, for a sight of which Belle was always longing. It had been such a long time since Easter, and the Midsummer vacation was yet a long way off.

Every week she got a long budget from 'Mother Mary,' which the girl devoured again and again until she received another to take its place. The letters had lost none of that atmosphere of contented happiness that had suddenly become so marked. Every week there appeared to be some

improvement in the Farleigh prospects to chronicle —Tom had gone back to the Alabama under vastly improved circumstances—Charlie was making altogether abnormal progress—and now came the news that they were removing from Spindleton to more pleasant surroundings.

Sometimes in their walks they had admired a pretty little cottage quite two miles and a half along the Chester Road. In summer the garden, which separated it from the highway, was a blaze of flowers, the admiration of everybody that passed. It was to this pleasant rural spot that Charlie had decided to move from Textile Row. He and Tom had got new bicycles, and would ride backwards and forwards to the mill. Mary declared that Belle's scholarship had brought the family luck; but her sister thought it would be fairer to attribute it to the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers.

Strangely enough, Mary now seldom mentioned him except in the most casual manner. Belle concluded that probably the gentleman did not spend a great deal of his time in Spindleton. Very few people would, she imagined, if they were free to go anywhere else.

Only to-day Belle had received a letter from Mary, and Mr. Ferrers was not mentioned once in the closely written pages. Nevertheless, she was to hear a very great deal concerning that gentleman before the day was over.

It was the usual mid-week half-holiday. Many of the girls were at the tennis-nets; some were poring over favourite authors in various shady nooks in the grounds; and quite a large party was on a broad ledge that stuck out like a shelf from the precipitous face of the promontory. It afforded a capital look out across the Irish Sea.

Belle was standing on the top of the cliff looking longingly at the girls below. She liked nothing better than to lie on the short turf that clothed the ledge and look out across the shimmering expanse of blue. Away in the distance on a clear day could be discerned the faint outline of Snae Fell in the Isle of Man. The girl concluded she would have to forgo the pleasure this afternoon, for the ledge appeared to be monopolized by seniors.

She was almost startled when a hand was laid upon her shoulder and a voice broke in upon her reflections—

'Well, dreamer, are you coming down to the ledge?'

It was Edna Bennett who spoke. She was one of Belle's special favourites, and was accompanied by her sister Kate, one of the very few seniors who treated the scholarship girl without any trace of condescension. Her pleasant smile was seconding the invitation of her sister.

A moment later the three girls, hand in hand, were clambering down the far-from-easy path to join

those below, where the two Bennetts were received with welcomes, and Belle with more than mere toleration—thanks to the fact that she accompanied Kate.

'You are just in time to hear the news,' cried one of the party. 'Come and listen to Maisie Foxwell, the lucky bounder.' As might be judged by her diction, it was Hilda Jordan who voiced the invitation.

Instead of allowing Maisie to make any announcement, however, most of the girls commenced to relate the news themselves, all speaking at the same time, expressing themselves in different words and as many different keys. Kate put her hands to her ears.

'Maisie going to be married?' she exclaimed, purposely misunderstanding. 'I am surprised at her.'

'I'd be more surprised at the bridegroom,' said Hilda Jordan. 'A chit like that, all legs and freckles.'

'Be careful, you libellous creature,' interrupted Maisie in mock reproval. 'It's my sister Dolly who is going to be married,' explained she to the newcomers.

'Going to spoil the Egyptians, you mean,' corrected Miss Jordan. 'Americans are always complaining that their heiresses are snapped up by needy English aristocrats. In annexing one of

Chicago's money-kings, Dolly is reversing the usual order of things.'

'I hope it isn't pigs,' said Edith Varney.

'That's just where the money comes from,' laughed Maisie. 'My prospective brother-in-law needn't be one himself just because he slaughters thousands of pigs every day. Chicago packers always boasted that they use every ounce of the pig from his snout to the tip of his tail; they lost nothing but the squeal. Hiram Garfield has gone one better in utilizing the squeal in the manufacture of children's toys.'

'But pigs!' again protested Miss Varney, with a little shudder.

'What of it?' asked Hilda Jordan. 'You don't suppose Mr. Garfield wears a blue smock and bloodstained leggings, and is everlastingly sharpening a knife on a steel hanging from his waist belt. I should go in for the dollars myself if I had the chance.'

Maisie was in a state of great excitement. The letter from her sister had only arrived by the afternoon post; she had not opened it until she was down on the ledge. She had not even heard of the American until to-day. He was applying to his matrimonial affairs the same hustling methods by which he had amassed his dollars, for the wedding was to take place at a fashionable London church in a fortnight's time.

The post has brought you good news, Maisie,' said Miss Jordan. 'It brought me the other kind.'

'Do tell us,' cried several voices at once.

Hilda considered for a moment.

'I don't see why I shouldn't,' she replied. 'I'll perhaps feel better for telling you about it.' And forthwith she launched into a long recital.

'I am one of the Fallowfields,' she said. 'Worse luck my mother never gave the least thought to dollars, but went and married a man with nothing but prospects. They were still prospects when he died, leaving my mother and me to exist on the dowry she had brought to him. Old Lord Fallowfield never forgave my poor mother for the *mésalliance*, and but for a maiden aunt I might have had to go for a governess or a waitress, or a milliner, or adopt some other ghastly method of earning a living.'

The girl was silent for a space. Her companions thought they could now understand Hilda's sometimes abounding discontent with the world in general.

'I've got a cousin, Kenyon Ferrers,' she recommenced. She was watching a trail of smoke far across the sea, or she might have perceived a start on the part of Belle Farleigh. 'He is about four years older than I. We used to play together when we were children, and our respective mothers marked us out for each other almost before we were out of the nursery.

'In due course he went off to Harrow and afterwards to Cambridge; I was sent to Penton Priory. Kenyon and I seldom met, but the understanding of our youthful days remained unbroken. You see his prospects were no better than my father's had been, and I had no intention of repeating my mother's mistake.'

'Then you didn't love him,' interrupted one of her audience.

'No—o. I suppose I didn't,' acknowledged Hilda. 'At any rate I did not intend to commit myself until I was older. There would be plenty of time to take him if nobody better presented himself—I mean somebody with more money.'

'You mercenary wretch,' interpolated Edith Varney.

'Well,' continued Hilda, 'twelve months ago Kenyon came in for a whole pot of money. Years ago one of the Fallowfield men married beneath him. The Earl disowned him and he disappeared and has never been heard of to this day. Of course he's dead and buried long ago, but had he lived he would have come in for quite a large fortune from a distant branch of the family. All the money has gone to Kenyon. He is perhaps richer than the present Earl himself.'

'And you call that bad news, you goose?' queried Maisie.

Hilda motioned for her to be silent. She continued—

'Kenyon, even as a boy, was filled with all sorts of whimsies. He got worse as he grew older; became interested in slum work and all sorts of tommy-nonsense for raising guttersnipes to a better life. He insisted upon looking upon his money as a sacred trust and has been ferreting all over the country trying to find what he calls the rightful heirs to the money. It's downright madness to run in the face of Providence and try to make oneself a beggar again.'

'You don't mean to say he has found them?' asked one of the girls.

'Something quite as bad,' was the reply. 'My mother writes to say that he has bought a cotton mill in Lancashire, and has expressed his intention of marrying one of the mill-girls. It sounds like a story out of a penny novelette—The Princess of the Loom, the Weaver's Pride, or the Maid of the Mill. He has written a letter to Lord Fallowfield full of the praises of his—Mary, I think her name is.

'Of course, Kenyon is stark, staring mad, and the family are thinking of having him placed under restraint. That will be a pretty ending to what might have been my romance—Kenyon in a mad-house and heaps of money rotting in Chancery.'

Belle Farleigh, lay at full length, with her elbows on the turf and her cheeks resting upon her hands.

Her shining eyes looked straight before her into space. Doubtless in the air, that shimmered with heat, she could see a dearly loved face.

The interest of her companions in Miss Jordan's story was as nothing compared to the scholarship girl's amazement. Hilda's romance might be shattered—but what of Mary's? 'Dear Mother Mary,' whispered the girl to herself.

'But what is the mill-hand like?' cried Maisie. 'She must be a nice girl, or a cultured, educated man would not be attracted to her.'

'She may have a pretty face,' asserted Hilda with a snort, 'but she is a mill-wench all the same. I saw some of them once at a railway station. They wore shawls over their heads; their skirts could have done with an extra flounce or two; and they wore dreadful iron-tipped clattering clogs.'

'Mary doesn't wear a shawl or clogs; and her skirts are longer than yours.'

The interruption was sensational. It commanded breathless attention. Belle suddenly found the eyes of the whole party focused upon her flaming cheeks.

'Do you know the creature?' asked Hilda with an incredulous gasp. 'Who is she? What is she like?'

'She is Mary Farleigh. She's my sister,' was the astounding reply. 'She is like—like——'

'Is she anything like you?' interrogated Kate Bennett.

'She's better,' affirmed Belle. 'She is the best girl in all the world.'

Most of the group nodded their heads. They could understand at least one feature of Kenyon Ferrers' madness.

Hilda Jordan, with puckered lips, was filled with frankest astonishment. She was trying to imagine what Belle would look like in another five or six years. Even wearing clogs and with a shawl over her head, she doubted whether that face would not be sufficient to turn a man's head. And if the sister were framed in the same aristocratic mould, she——

But Hilda only shook her head in token that her thoughts were in too great a whirl for cogent reasoning. To-morrow Lady Fallowfield was due at Westland-on-Sea to open a bazaar in aid of funds to provide the town with a lifeboat station. Her ladyship would be sure to be accompanied by other ladies of the Fallowfield family, and Hilda was deciding that in some way or other they must make the acquaintance of Belle Farleigh. It would at any rate awaken them to the fact that there existed at least one very potent reason for Kenyon Ferrers making a fool of himself.

If Hilda could only have seen into the future just twenty-four hours, she would have known that the method of Belle's introduction to the Fallowfield ladies would be such as those highborn dames would never forget.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WOOING OF A MILL-GIRL

SPINDLETON, sordid, grimy, busy, appeared perhaps little better in the June sunlight than when its acquaintance was first made on that dreary December morning almost exactly seven months ago. The darkness hid at least some of the more forbidding features inherently associated with strenuous, industrial life.

The streets around the Mission Hall presented an unusually quiet appearance; the difference lay practically in the entire absence of children. From end to end of the narrow streets there did not appear to be a single child of school age; there were only little toddlers sitting on doorsteps or making dust pies in the gutters, under the care of old crones, who were paid a few coppers per week to mind the offspring of the mothers at work in the mills.

The schools were closed for the whole day. It was the occasion of the annual Sunday-school treat. At eleven in the morning a long procession of happy, noisy, gesticulating juveniles marched to the railway station to entrain for the woods at Gradley Fell.

There they would spend a happy day under the supervision of the minister and a host of teachers and other willing helpers.

There were more teachers available this year than had been the case since John Glynn had ceased to attend the Alabama Mill. William Jarrocks had always put obstacles in the way of a Sunday-school teacher who had desired leave of absence to attend the treat. This year any teacher employed at the Alabama had not only received willing permission, but the privilege did not entail the loss of any pay. Why, 'th' yung boss' himself was Mr. Davenant's right-hand man, and never before had the arrangements been so complete to ensure the children's happiness. There was a whole cartload of toys—a gift for every child; there was a Punch and Judy show; and Spindleton town band played at intervals.

Although the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers was new to Spindleton, he was already the most popular employer in the town. The Alabama employés used to swear by John Glynn, but the new proprietor bade fair to put his kindly reputation completely in the shade. Every old-time privilege had been restored to the workers; John Bilter had gone to another mill where his particular talents would find more scope than under Mr. Ferrers' régime; and every 'gaffer' in the Alabama had received instructions to treat the hands with all possible consideration.

Very shortly a profit-sharing scheme was to come into operation.

From the highest to the lowest in the mill there was not a single discontented hand. Some of the millowners in the neighbourhood were prophesying all sorts of trouble that would assuredly follow this adoption of socialistic methods, this pampering of employés, who never studied anybody's interests but their own. But Kenyon Ferrers went on his way, unmoved by the warnings of the pessimists.

This afternoon even the most confirmed croaker could have found no fault with Mr. Ferrers' desire to bring undiluted happiness to the children. It was a glorious day at Gradley Fell. Mr. Davenant and Mr. Ferrers, and Mary and Charlie Farleigh stood watching the marital differences of Punch and Judy.

Mary's thoughts flew to Belle. Little did she guess that at that moment her sister was seated upon a ledge of rock, high up above the sea that beat unceasingly against the foot of the cliff, conjuring up the lineaments of her sister. Mary would not have laughed so frankly at some remark of Kenyon Ferrers could she have divined the scornful references to the mill-wench, which were on the tip of Hilda Jordan's tongue.

At five o'clock the scholars sat down to tea and the helpers were kept busily employed in ministering to the appetites which were sharpened by the gentle

breeze that came down to them from the offshoots of the Pennines in the far distance.

Later, in a big marquee, the teachers and their friends partook of their own meal. All day long Mary found Kenyon Ferrers constantly at her elbow, as she sought to aid the enjoyment of the scholars in her own class. It was in vain that she told him there was at least one class whose teacher the claims of business had not permitted to come to the treat. In looking after those teacherless youngsters he would find scope for his superabundant energies.

But Ferrers was not to be cozened into doing anything that did not exactly coincide with his inclinations. If he went away apparently to fall in with her suggestion, it was only for Mary to find him back at her side in a very few moments, avowing that, either he could not discover the particular children she mentioned, or that he had found them, only to learn they were getting on very well without him. At any rate Mary's scholars found nothing to object to in his presence. They had a royal time. It was astonishing what long distance races he sent them, which at frequent intervals left him alone with their teacher.

When the teachers sat down to tea, manœuvre as Mary would, she found Mr. Ferrers seated next to her. She had hoped Charlie would appear to take the vacant seat, but her brother had disappeared altogether.

'I wonder where Charlie can be?' she remarked, looking down the long table.

'I should say he is very nearly in Spindleton at the present moment,' replied Mr. Ferrers.

'Did you send him?' she queried, supposing some mill business had necessitated Charlie's recall from the festivities.

'He has gone to fetch the car,' he replied. 'It will be a lovely evening for a drive home round by the moorland road.'

It was not until the teachers were commencing to gather the scholars together in readiness to return to the station, that Mr. Ferrers again referred to the subject.

'They tell me, Miss Farleigh,' said he, 'that from the back of the wood yonder, you can get a most expansive view with the Pennines in the background. Will you come with me to take a look at it before we return? Mr. Davenant is coming too,' he added persuasively.

Mary turned and walked between the two gentlemen in the direction indicated. They were close to the wood when the minister left them with a hasty apology, announcing that he had forgotten some duty at the marquee. He begged them not to allow his withdrawal to interfere with their purpose, and Mary could not with a very good grace refuse to accede.

It took a much longer time to walk through the

wood than Mary had calculated would be the case.

When they did at last emerge upon the edge of the moor, it seemed as if Mr. Ferrers had forgotten the special object they had in view when they started. There was that in his demeanour which caused a faint flush to rise up in Mary's cheeks ; her heart fluttered in a manner altogether unusual.

'I am sure we ought to turn back, Mr. Ferrers,' she urged suddenly. 'Mr. Davenant will need all possible help to ensure the safe return of every scholar.'

'Impossible!' was the reply. 'We could not return in time. The train will be moving out of the station in five minutes.'

'Oh!'

Mary's gasp was more than a token of astonishment. It sounded suspiciously like a sob. Mr. Ferrers had proved a good friend to her and hers; he had been kindness itself ; but she would owe him no gratitude for giving people occasion to talk of her, as they assuredly would when at the station their joint absence was discovered.

'Mary! Please do not be angry with me,' he pleaded. Quite unconsciously her name slipped from his lips. The girl noticed it, however. It bore, too, an intonation that was new to her ears ; it deepened the flush in her cheeks ; it changed her heart flutters to great pulsating throbs, that she felt she could almost hear. 'I did not intend you to

go back with the others,' her companion continued. 'You have no cause for alarm; Mr. Davenant will not expect you to return with them.'

Mary shot him a quick glance, quickly dropping her eyes again. She could not meet the gaze which she found bent upon her. She dimly realized that the edge of the moor was the entrance to a new world—a beautiful world into which she had never in her wildest dreams expected to enter.

'I don't understand,' she said weakly. 'I thought it was the last train.'

'So it is,' replied Ferrers. 'That was why I sent Charlie for the car. Do you see the building standing out against the skyline?' he asked, pointing away to their left. 'It is an inn, and there we shall find the car waiting for us by the time we can reach it.'

'And Mr. Davenant——' she commenced.

'He quite agreed that I deserved some recompense for my arduous labours of the day,' laughed Ferrers. 'Say you will not be less kind than that very amiable gentleman.'

Even had she wished it otherwise, and she was far from willing to concede so much, Mary considered it would serve no useful purpose to avow it. The walk across the moor could not prove otherwise than delightful. A car ride to follow—well, that would be another thing. Even Charlie would make a difference, she concluded.

They were walking gently on, the girl striving feverishly to keep their conversation in a prosaic channel. Several times she was only able to achieve it by being positively abrupt, which did but intimate to her companion that she recognized the sweet intimacy that surrounded their unexpected companionship.

When the Honourable Kenyon made his arrangements he did so with a definite end in view; and when he had enjoyed the sweet flutterings of the girl, who was equally surprised and frightened at her own newly awakened emotions, he would put to the test the hopes with which he was possessed.

The occasion came with a suddenness that shook him out of himself. Half way across the moor they arrived at a ditch. Ferrers extended his hand to assist his companion, but Mary, filled with increasing tremulousness, elected to forgo his aid. She jumped, but in her haste took off too soon, with the result that she fell short upon the opposite bank. She gave an exclamation of dismay, clutched at the furze which came away in her hands, and would have fallen down the bank but that Kenyon sprang to her assistance. As his arms closed around her slight form, some stray tendrils of her hair swept his brow, he could feel her warm breath upon his cheek. The floodgates of his pent-up love were opened wide; the hot blood surged through his veins.

'My darling!' he cried. For a second, in her

alarm she had closed her eyes. The heavy lashes were raised from her cheeks, and before she veiled them again he caught a glimpse of the heaven that lay for him in their shining depths. He stood in the bottom of the trench, with her unresisting form in his warm clasp. He placed his lips on her cheek, and then he took loving toll of the rich red half-parted lips.

Like a frightened bird, Mary suddenly eluded his grasp, and with her hand to her tumultuous breast she reached the top of the bank, with Ferrers but a step in the rear.

'You should not have done it,' she panted. 'You —you——'

But he showed not the least sign of penitence. He was looking at her with devouring eyes. She dared not meet them.

'Little girl,' he queried, 'why won't your lips confirm what I read in your eyes?' He took a step nearer to her and took her face between his hands. 'Look at me,' he said. 'Tell me you do not love me, and I will make the most abject apology man ever made to woman.'

But Mary Farleigh could find no words, and equally no inclination, to comply with the request; and the next moment she was again in his arms, sealing and resealing the sweet compact.

But again she sprang apart from him.

'Mr. Ferrers,' she commenced.

'Kenyon,' he suggested lovingly.

'Yes, yes,' she said almost impatiently. 'But it will not do. It can never be. We are so far removed——'

'That is easily remedied,' he interrupted with a happy laugh, as he again threw his arm around her.

'You know what I mean,' she protested. 'You have a social position to consider—while I—I am——'

'Just the dearest girl in all the world,' he broke in impulsively. 'You are mine—mine.'

And Mary without further remonstrance permitted him to give her fresh tokens of his sweet possession.

'We'll move on, dear,' said Kenyon a few moments later. 'I have got something to tell that will very much surprise you.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

EVERYTHING ALTERED

AS the lovers made their way across the remaining portion of the moor there was very little fear of Mary meeting with any fresh mishap. Kenyon held her too tightly for her to stumble over even a trifling obstacle. She, in blissful consciousness of her newly-won, unexpected happiness, walked on air, satisfied to go on and on so long as that fond arm encircled her yielding form.

She was listening in rapt attention while he explained his relationship to Lord Fallowfield. She was in fact not a little frightened at the mention of so many aristocratic relatives, whom he found necessary to name for her thoroughly to understand the story he had to unfold.

The family tree rather bewildered her, but eventually she recognized the main point, namely, that Kenyon was the only son of the Honourable George Ferrers, who himself was the third son of the late Earl of Fallowfield. The Ferrers family was blessed with practically no wealth ; and consequently there

was nothing left for Kenyon but to qualify himself for a post in the diplomatic service.

'I want you to grasp clearly that the old Earl had three sons, the eldest, Eric, who is the present holder of the title; the second, Gerald, and the third son, my father, who died while I was a little chap of five. I had already lost my mother. Mark you, Gerald, the second son, quarrelled with his father upon the occasion of the Earl's second marriage. The quarrel in itself was a sufficiently bitter estrangement, but when he added to it the enormity of desiring to wed some penniless, unknown lass, the Earl, in a towering rage, discarded him for ever.

'Gerald disappeared and was never heard of again; he had refused even to accept the allowance which his father's anger could not legally withhold from him. From that day, over twenty years ago, to this present moment Gerald was lost to the world—at least to his world.'

When Mary had assured him not only that she understood, but that she was deeply interested, he proceeded.

'About two years ago, had Uncle Gerald been alive, he would have succeeded to a fairly large fortune that came unexpectedly from a distant branch of the family. Failing him or his heirs, it came to the third son or his successors. Consequently, much to my surprise, I became a rich man, better off in fact than Fallowfield.'

'Richer than the Earl of Fallowfield!' repeated Mary, half dazedly.

Kenyon did but press her arm affectionately, as he continued—

'I became possessed with the idea that Uncle Gerald was alive, or if not alive, that he had married the girl of his choice, and had left heirs behind him to whom my money rightly belonged. I set on foot all sorts of inquiries, but all in vain until I met you. You do not know it, but you are a Fallowfield to your finger tips. In fact it was your resemblance to my sister Nora that drew my attention to you in the mill gateway early one morning in December. The way you rebuked old Bilter was our Nora to the life. She is Lady Chesney now. She's no end of a good sort is Nora; she'll welcome you as a sister.'

Mary was afflicted with doubts, but she did not give expression to them.

'I felt positive that you were my cousin, Uncle Gerald's daughter, you know. I got Mr. Davenant to inquire into your history, and as there appeared to be a mystery concerning the identity of your father, that quickly made me positive we were on the right track.'

'But—but——' interrupted Mary. She changed her mind, however, and begged him to continue.

'Then Chesney must go and get mauled by a bear in the Rockies and I had to set off post haste to America. I wrote a letter to Forster, giving him all

the particulars I had gathered, and instructing him to continue the inquiries. Jarrocks probably read the letter which I left to him to post, although we couldn't prove it. Doubtless that made him doubly keen in his desire to marry you. I can easily believe he wanted you for your own sweet sake,' Kenyon admitted, while he gave his sweetheart a practical token of his thankfulness that the manager's wooing had proved unsuccessful.

'Forster came down to Spindleton, and through Mr. Davenant saw various papers and mementoes that were likely to render assistance. Only this morning I have heard definitely that the long chase and a stern chase has ended in failure. Forster says that, while there exists a doubt as to the exact antecedents of your father, it is proved beyond all doubt that he was not Uncle Gerald.'

Mary was silent for a moment. The one idea that possessed her was the thought that Kenyon Ferrers had been engaged on her behalf in a task that might have disinherited him.

'I am glad for your sake that you did not succeed in diverting the money to another branch of the family,' she whispered. 'It would be very nice to be—somebody; but I've—oh, Kenyon! I've got you, and nothing else counts in all the wide world.'

'Yes,' he replied quietly, 'thanks to Forster's inquiries ending in smoke. Something would have

counted had it turned out otherwise.' He was speaking more to himself than to Mary. He was looking straight forward into space, and scarcely realized that she was looking at him inquiringly.

'What—do—you—mean?' she asked slowly. 'What difference would it have made to us?'

'A very great deal,' he replied. 'You are just Mary Farleigh, but if you had been cousin Mary and a rich young person to boot, it would have made all the difference. Wouldn't it?' he inquired.

'It would have made no difference to me,' she said determinedly.

'But then you would never have known,' he explained, 'and I do not believe for a moment that you would have proposed to me. Now would you have done?' he asked, with a quizzical air.

She put up her hand and stroked his cheek.

'We do not know what might have happened,' she replied. 'It is all very well as it is. But, oh! Kenyon, whatever will your relatives say? You've told me of one dreadful result of a *mésalliance*, and now you are seeking to repeat history.'

Ferrers laughed lightly.

'Fallowfield at any rate can't repeat his father's share,' he said confidently. 'He can't cut me off with an avuncular shilling. Besides he doesn't take after the old Earl; he would never even trouble himself to bestow upon me the family curse. If he were so unwise I could snap my fingers at him.

As a matter of fact I wrote to him a few days ago and announced that I was in love with you.'

'And what did he say?' she inquired almost breathlessly.

'I have received no reply yet,' he answered. 'I'm not quite sure where he is.'

'But,' persisted Mary, 'if there is opposition I couldn't—couldn't——'

'Oh! yes, you could,' he exclaimed. 'We will do it straight off the reel and ignore any opposition.'

Though the girl protested that any such course would be impossible, in her own mind she was by no means certain that Kenyon Ferrers would not get his own way, if he very badly desired it.

As they walked, they had frequently stopped at various points in Ferrers' recital. Both of them had been oblivious of the flight of time. It was only when Kenyon put his foot into a rabbit-hole to fling him almost upon his face, that they recognized how rapidly the night was closing in.

'By Jove!' he cried, 'Charlie will think we are lost.'

'Oh, won't he be surprised, when he hears my news,' said Mary. 'My happy, happy news.'

'Not so very much,' replied her lover, 'unless he has no eyes in his head. He has got his wits about him has your brother. Chawlie is a gradely foine chap, Aw tell yo'.' Though Mary laughed at Ken-

yon's imitation of the Spindleton dialect, her heart was filled to bursting at this appreciation of her brother. And in fact Ferrers was fond of Charlie for his own good qualities; he had already tested him in a variety of ways and had yet to find him wanting.

Presently they struck the road, now almost indistinguishable from the vast expanse of shadowy moorland.

'How far to the inn?' asked Mary.

As if in answer to her query, only a couple of hundred yards or so away there suddenly shone out two great splashes of brilliant white light.

'There's Charlie lighting the lamps,' he said. '"Scarlet Runner" will soon whip us over to Spindleton.'

Charlie was beginning to fear that Mr. Ferrers had changed his mind and had returned with the school excursion. His surprise was great when two figures emerged out of the gloom—they had purposely kept out of the beams of the big acetylene lamps.

'Sorry to keep you waiting, old man,' said Ferrers.

Charlie had never had to complain of any lack of friendly consideration on the part of his employer; but he certainly wondered at a new tone in Ferrers' voice. The next moment there was an addition to his surprise.

'You, Mary?' he cried. There was a note of regret, if not of reproof, in the exclamation. It did

not escape the notice of Ferrers, the twitch of whose lips the darkness hid from Farleigh

He stepped to Charlie's side and took him by the arm.

'Mary has been in good care,' he said. There was a tremor in his voice as he added: 'The same care that, please God, will watch over her all her days.' And as Mary took his other arm and laid her head upon his shoulder, all Charlie could do was to wring Kenyon's hand in mute astonishment.

Ferrers assisted Mary into the tonneau and stepped into the seat beside her, really before Charlie had half realized the wonder of it all.

'Neaw then, Chawlie! Oop tha git an' pike forrad. Pike forrad, lad,' he repeated, with a happy chuckle, as he drew Mary closer to him.

This was at least an exhortation that Charlie could understand; and a minute later, with both hands on the steering gear, he was making the red car hum as it commenced to lick up the miles that lay between them and Spindleton.

As the lamps revealed the white ribbon of road, they did but typify to Mary love's sweet glow, that had come to light her path in life's journey through the coming years.

When, exactly at ten o'clock, the car drew up at the cottage on the Chester Road, Tom was looking out for them. He had come home with the excursion, and, knowing nothing of Charlie's return to Spindle-

ton to fetch the car, or Mary's walk with Mr. Ferrers, he was wondering what was afoot. In boyish fashion he concluded that for Mary thus to come in style was 'not half a bit of all right.'

He needed no second invitation to keep an eye on the vehicle. Charlie stayed a couple of minutes while he oiled several points within the bonnet. Mary and Ferrers turned towards the cottage.

'There's a big letter from Belle, waiting for you, Mary,' Tom cried, as they went up the path.

No sooner did they enter the little room than Mary seized the large envelope that lay upon the table.

'It is big, too,' she said, as she opened the package.

'Oh!' she cried. 'Belle has had her photograph taken. Isn't it a beauty?'

Kenyon Ferrers was looking over her shoulder. He had not yet seen the scholarship girl. Mary heard him catch his breath. When she turned to him she was surprised at the look that had entered his face.

'It is more wonderful than ever,' he said in a hushed voice. 'She is the living image of Lady Isabel.'

'Lady Isabel?' repeated Mary.

'Yes. Lady Isabel Fallowfield,' he answered. 'You have heard of her. She hid the Earl of Derby after his defeat by the Roundheads at the battle of Wigan. She is the Fallowfield heroine. Her

portrait by Lely is one of the world's famous pictures.'

At that moment Charlie entered.

'I had forgotten these,' he said to Ferrers. He was presenting several letters and a telegram. 'I brought them from the mill when I fetched the car.'

Kenyon tore open the telegram. His face suddenly whitened; he ran his fingers through his hair; his hand gripped the table in search of support.

'This—alters—everything!' he said slowly, as he held out the telegram to Mary.

CHAPTER XXIX

A SCHOOL-GIRL HEROINE

WESTLAND-ON-SEA was *en fête*. Flags were flying from every staff in the town; the Grand Parade was as gay as bunting and evergreens and flowers could make it; the pier was in festive garb from end to end. The organizers of the Lifeboat Bazaar had taken every step to ensure its success; excursions were running to the town from all parts of the county. As they viewed the great crowds of well-dressed visitors that thronged the sea-front, the pier, and the wide strip of sandy beach, they felt certain that their efforts would be crowned with success.

The carnival spirit in the town extended to St. Margaret's, perched upon the massive cliff that dominated the picturesque resort. The girls had worked hard at all kinds of useful and ornamental needlework with which to stock St. Margaret's Stall, at which a dozen of the girls were to act as attendants.

For these coveted posts there was a ballot among the senior students. Kate Bennett, Maisie Foxwell, and Edith Varney were among the successful ones.

Hilda Jordan drew a blank; but that was of small consequence, as she would join the party of her august relative, the Countess of Fallowfield.

During the last few days most of the girls had been in receipt of huge cardboard boxes containing gala dresses from home. Belle had already seen a few of these choice confections. They had not filled her with envy, but she was too thoroughly girlish not to realize that she would appear but as a common garden butterfly in a company of red admirals at the very least.

She had hesitated whether to write to Mary to tell her of the preparations her companions were making for the fête; but she forbore, lest 'Mother Mary' would worry about it, and perhaps deprive herself of something in order to deck out her sister. The family prospects had improved, it was true, but, she feared, not sufficiently to warrant increased expenditure on her behalf.

With a sigh Belle decided that her cream serge costume with a simple but very becoming hat to match would have to serve. It was at least the best dress she had ever possessed, thanks, perhaps, to the fact that Mrs. Davenant had advised Mary largely as to her sister's outfit—not that the elder girl lacked taste, but the familiarity with just what was required in a girl in Belle's rather unusual position.

At half-past two upon this auspicious afternoon, Belle had just completed the last finishing touches

before her little mirror, when Edna Bennett burst in upon her. The girl's dress was a picture in Cambridge blue. Belle viewed her with frank admiration, and did not hesitate to express it.

'Don't be a goose, Belle,' was her reply. 'It isn't the dress, it's the face that tells. With my pasty complexion I look a perfect fright; while you—you would look splendid if you were dressed in newspapers. Make haste, Belle—belle of the ball,' she added.

At a quarter to three the St. Margaret's girls, two by two, set out for the Public Hall. The earlier portion of their route was compassed easily enough; but when they gained the Parade their progress was slower, owing to the more congested footpaths. When they neared the Hall they could perceive several big motor-cars drawn up in front of the portico, which indicated that the Countess and her party had already arrived.

Suddenly a great outcry arose. The eyes of the crowd turned this way and that, in order to locate the exact spot from which it came, and still more the cause of it. There was nothing to be seen, and yet there was tumult in the air. At a street corner very close at hand the crowd thickened for a moment, only suddenly to break and scatter in a dozen directions.

'Mad dog! Mad dog!'

The cry passed from mouth to mouth; panic-

stricken women and children were huddling themselves close to the walls, or seeking refuge in any open doorway near to hand.

Round the corner came a big black retriever. His tail was between his legs ; his foam-flecked jaws were snapping right and left as he fled along the pavement straight towards the Hall.

In the rear of the panting, frightened animal the crowd found its voice ; in front of it there was a solemn hush, save for the moans of hysterical women and the sobs of frightened children.

The footpath cleared as if by magic ; if the dog desired the great white flagstones for his path there was no one desirous of disputing possession with him.

At the next street corner, fifty yards away, stood a young police-constable, truncheon in hand. The resolute set of his firm lips showed that he recognized the call of duty, if some of the cowering men nearer to the dog had failed to perceive theirs.

On came the dog, yapping, snarling, and snapping at every bound. In the middle of the roadway the St. Margaret's girls stood in two broken lines of palpitating girlish fear. Some of them held their hands to their faces to hide the terrifying sight.

The next moment a cry of horror escaped hundreds of throats. Down the steps of the Hall came running a little four-year-old boy in Highland costume. He was laughing gleefully at having eluded his nurse, who hastened after him with admonishing cries.

Twenty yards away was the mad brute whose touch would mean death. The woman cast one agonizing glance at the flying peril before she fell back fainting upon the steps.

A motor-car driver hurled a missile at the dog; it struck his flank but failed to divert his course.

The child was doomed!

But in that supreme moment, when women quailed and strong men blanched, the heroic spirit flamed up in one young breast. From out of the disordered ranks of the St. Margaret's girls shot a cream-clad figure just as the dog leapt at the little victim.

Nobody exactly knew how it had happened, but the next instant a score of men had shaken themselves out of the paralysis that had clamped their limbs in useless rigidity. With his head enveloped in a cream serge jacket, the beast was clawing furiously at the girl, whose arms enclosed his neck with desperate clasp. Over and over they rolled, but the heroine, her eyes filled with the fear of death that lay beneath that woven texture, held on to her furious captive.

The moment the policeman saw the imminent peril of the child he had started to run. He was the first man upon the spot. His methods were as prompt as they were effective—a kick with his heavy boot and one sickening blow of the truncheon, dissipated all fear of a tragedy.

The crowd took a second to breathe a sigh of relief, and then the cheers broke out—cheers of heartfelt thankfulness for dangers past—cheers for the girl, whom a score of solicitous hands were already raising to her feet.

Belle Farleigh was as one in a dream. She could scarcely grasp that the horror was over. She was covered with dust; her hands and her face were bleeding. Her fingers and far up her arms were lacerated where the claws of the dog had taken fierce toll of her delicate flesh. She clasped her poor little hands together as she recognized the pain in them. She swayed and would have fallen but for Constable Jones, whose look seemed to forbid any man to assist her; they had stood by helpless in face of the risk, and their services could be dispensed with now that the danger lay stark and dead at their feet.

Some unfathomed telepathic quality had in the meantime swept through the Hall. The public and the stallholders were pouring out into the street. Among the foremost was Lady Chesney. She snatched up her boy to her bosom, instinctively realising that in some providential manner he had been preserved to her. A score of voices were assuring her that he was unharmed, and in the same breath they indicated whom she had to thank for it.

Miss Vaughan, the tears rolling down her cheeks, had one arm around her scholar, while with the other hand she wiped the blood off the wan cheek.

'Oh! you brave darling,' exclaimed Lady Chesney, as she stooped impulsively to kiss the heroic schoolgirl. But she drew back in startled amazement, as with faltering lips she murmured: 'Lady Isabel! Lady Isabel.'

She looked into the girl's face in strained silence for a moment.

'Child! who are you?' she whispered.

'Belle Farleigh!' replied the girl wonderingly.

'Where do you come from?'

'Spindleton.'

Lady Chesney laid her lips to the girl's cheek.

'You gave me quite a shock,' she said. 'For a moment I thought you were somebody else. But you are a bonny little Lancashire witch,' she added, with another kiss.

The crowd surged and swayed around them. Those in the forefront made no sound; they felt that they were watching a romantic drama to which they held no clue. A word any moment might disclose the secret, and for worlds they would not miss it.

'We will go to an ante-room,' said Miss Vaughan to Lady Chesney, of whose identity she was in ignorance. With her arm still encircling Belle, they passed up the steps. Lady Chesney followed, kissing and fondling the little fellow, whose wide-opened eyes showed his wonder at his mother's tremulous solicitude.

One of the attendants opened a door, and the four of them passed into a little room, towards which came hurrying the Countess of Fallowfield and several other ladies, who were of her party.

The Countess was in a state of great excitement. It was connected with a telegram which she held in her hand. She had yet to learn that the noise in the street was of any special significance. She quite failed to notice Miss Vaughan and Belle.

'Nora!' she cried. 'I have had an astounding telegram from Fallowfield. Gerald's children have been found. Kenyon has wired to say that the eldest is no less than that mill-girl. You know whom I mean—the one—the one——"

'The one he called his Lancashire witch,' added Lady Chesney.

'Yes,' acknowledged the Countess. 'Her name is Mary Farleigh. She——'

'Oh! oh!'

The Countess paused. She wondered at the startled interruption. She asked a question with her eyes.

'I have found a second one,' replied her relative.

'A second what?' inquired her ladyship almost irritably. She disliked mystification.

'A second Lancashire witch,' said Lady Chesney. She was indicating Belle by a nod of her head.

The Countess raised her lorgnette. A second later it would have clattered to the floor, but for the gold chain that restrained it.

CHAPTER XXX

A SWEET CONQUEST

'THIS—alters—everything!'

When those halting words fell from Kenyon Ferrers in the front room of the little cottage, Mary recognized in them some dread sentence that would expunge from the slate of her heart the inscription which only to-night had been written upon its fair surface. Her lover's pale face and the emotion under which he was labouring stabbed her gentle soul with the certainty of disaster.

With trembling fingers she took the proffered telegram. She straightened it out and read it. An indescribable look entered her eyes—it seemed to be a mingling of fear and surprise, only for both to be obliterated by what looked like exultation, and which last caused Ferrers to hold his breath. It appeared to crystallize his resolution; he squared his shoulders; his tightly drawn lips set in a firmer line.

Mary, quite unconscious of Kenyon's scrutiny, or Charlie's look of wonderment, was looking across the room to where through the open door she could

see the green hedge lighted up by the car lamps, as though it were a bit of spectacular scenery under the limelight. In the brief space of a few seconds she had been called upon to take the stage to play a part of which she knew no lines, and for which only her loving heart could prompt her.

Without any warning she sank upon her knees, and burying her head in her arms upon the table, she burst into tears.

Charlie, in great perturbation at his sister's distress, and in much concern at what possibly might be the cause of it, made a movement as though he would seek to comfort her.

Ferrers negatived it with a look, which Charlie interpreted as a desire that he would leave the lovers to themselves. With a backward glance at his sister he passed out to join Tom at the car.

Ferrers laid his hand upon the bowed head; he stroked the soft brown hair, burnished into gold by the lamp-flame which was only a few inches removed from it.

'Mary!'

The tone was low, but there was a vibrant note in it that caused the girl to choke off in the middle of a sob.

'Mary!' he repeated. 'There is no need for you to weep; rather is it an occasion to laugh and sing.'

The girl raised her head from her arm and looked up at him. Never had she appeared more beautiful

than with great pearls of tears upon her eyelids. For a second he threw his stern resolve to the wind. He stooped down and kissed the tears away. She threw her arms around his neck and held him down to her. The delicate lavender perfume of her garments was in his nostrils; the innate sweetness of her tremulous womanhood obsessed him. His resolution was overwhelmed by an ocean of passionate desire not to forgo the sweet joy of her possession. All trembling she rose to her feet and with her hand upon his shoulders faced him.

'Laugh? sing?' she queried. 'You said that everything was—was '— her voice broke—'altered.'

Thus recalled to his declaration, he sought gently to escape her grasp, but she had interlaced her fingers at the back of his neck and kept him prisoner.

'Of course it is altered,' he affirmed. 'I didn't know when I spoke or—or—I told you earlier in the evening '— he broke off—'that had you been Uncle Gerald's heiress I could not, as a poor man, honourably woo you.'

A new light entered her eyes.

'It can't affect me directly,' replied Mary. 'I am only a girl. Charlie is the eldest son, and if you are poor, I—I——'

Ferrers seemed suddenly to grow more alert. He was hanging upon her words.

'Yes, if I am poor——' he repeated.

'Oh, Kenyon!' she cried. 'Cannot you under-

stand that whether you are rich or poor makes no alteration in my love for you. If we were poor, you might even need it all the more.'

'Well, I am poor,' he said; 'but you are rich. You, not Charlie,' he explained. 'The money descends to the eldest child regardless of sex; the others will receive competences; but the great bulk of the wealth falls to you.'

'Then for your sake I am glad,' she asserted. 'In your highmindedness you impoverished yourself for me. When we were walking across the moor you said you did not believe I would propose to you.' A rich colour mounted up into her cheeks. 'But, Kenyon, I do—I do.'

The next instant she knew that she had won. Man born of woman could not withstand so direct attack. Kenyon capitulated, and yet his sweet conqueror permitted him to march out of his citadel of honest pride with all the honours of war.

Out in the road Charlie was wondering at the sudden rift in the lovers' lute. Tom gathered that Mr. Ferrers and his sister were having a momentous interview, of the subject of which his brother pleaded ignorance. The strange development of affairs almost immediately upon their entrance into the cottage was causing him to doubt whether he had grasped the true significance of the intimation he had received at the moorside inn.

Presently Ferrers came to the door and quietly

whistled ; and in a few quick steps Charlie was at his side.

'Mary wants you, old man,' said Ferrers. 'She desires to surprise you almost out of your life.'

One thing was already patent to Charlie. He recognized that his young master had regained his equability. Nay, more than that, he simply radiated happy content.

A glance at Mary showed that she too had been transformed by happiness, the quick-change artiste. She was radiant, exalted, her eyes gleaming with the light that shines on neither sea nor land. She took hold of her brother and waltzed him round and round the cottage till they were both breathless. Suddenly Mary stooped to pick up the telegram that had been lying unheeded upon the floor.

'Read it,' she said, as she pushed it into his hands.

'From Forster, Quality Court,' he read out aloud. 'Mary Farleigh the daughter of Gerald Mannering beyond shadow of doubt. Proofs unexpectedly to hand. Letter follows.'

Charlie looked across at his sister and Ferrers, and back again to the telegram.

'I'm a bad hand at puzzles,' he said slowly. 'What does it mean?'

But Mary could not keep him in suspense any longer.

'It means that our father was a gentleman,' she said. 'We knew that,' she corrected. 'It means

that because of a family quarrel he assumed another name. He was the Honourable Gerald Mannering; and our dear mother was Lady Mannering, although she died without ever learning the truth. She probably knew that we could claim a better position, in fact she set inquiries afoot, but was robbed of the papers that might have afforded the necessary clues. I have often wondered at the pathetic look in her eyes after paralysis had robbed her tongue of speech and her hands of use. She doubtless desired to tell me to persevere until we had ravelled out the secret.'

'Lady Mannering!' Charlie repeated his mother's title hesitatingly.

'Lady Mary Mannering!' corrected Ferrers. 'Commonly called "Mother Mary,"' he added, as he slipped his arm round Mary's waist.

It was too much for Charlie. He drew his hand down his face; he was seeking to satisfy himself that he was not asleep.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed. 'Who are we? Who am I?' His inquiry was quite comical in its tone of bewilderment.

It was Ferrers who replied.

'Well, Cousin Charlie,' he said, 'I expect the next edition of Debrett will assure the world at large that you are the Honourable Charles Mannering, nephew of the Earl of Fallowfield of that ilk.'

Charlie sat heavily upon a chair. Had it hap-

pened not to have been there, he would have sat down all the same, even though it were upon the floor.

'All this is very sudden, isn't it?' he said. 'It isn't a joke of yours?' he asked, with almost a glance of suspicion at Ferrers.

'No joke and no mistake!' Ferrers assured him. 'Forster is the wrong chap to be led astray. Although he has been working hard I believe he was urged on chiefly by the desire to prove that the money was really mine. If he is satisfied, you may as well at once accept it as gospel truth.'

This statement was but making Charlie's confusion worse confounded.

'Of course,' said Ferrers to Mary, 'the poor chap only knows half the story yet. Let me explain briefly.

'You are the Honourable Charles Mannering,' he commenced. 'That is perfectly plain, isn't it?'

Charlie's look was only indicative that he realized what was said to him. He did not yet admit that anything was plain.

'Your position carries a decent income with it, but as the courts persistently refused to allow the presumption of your father's death until a few months ago, the accumulation of twenty odd years will total up to a very considerable amount.'

'How much?' asked Charlie. There now appeared something tangible upon which he could seize.

'I'm scarcely certain,' replied Kenyon. 'But if it's only £5,000 a year—and it is certain not to be less—that would tot up to a cool hundred thousand, wouldn't it?'

Charlie gasped. He had hitherto supposed that twenty times five did equal a hundred; but any such arithmetical demonstration was beyond him for the moment.

'There are of course smaller amounts due to your younger sister and brother,' continued Ferrers. 'That comes to them simply because they are Mannerings.' He paused a moment and moistened his lips. 'Now we come to the aspect in which I am more closely concerned. Years ago, soon after he disappeared in fact, your father became entitled to quite a large fortune from an altogether outside branch of the family. Failing him it went to his eldest child. The courts having presumed his death and there being no known heirs, the money came to me. I lost it to-day, and before I knew my loss I recovered it again. Recovered my fortune and a wife with it—a dear, lovable Lancashire witch,' he added quietly.

Charlie, having recovered from his surprise, now had innumerable questions to ask, to most of which Ferrers was able to give prompt and equally satisfactory replies.

'You'll know all about it very shortly,' he said. 'You will be in the hands of the lawyers in no time. They will kill the fatted calf for you,' he laughed,

'and incidentally annex a little of the fat for themselves. I should think you'll invite me to supper now,' he concluded. 'I'm fairly exhausted. I've been talking like a cheap Jack for goodness knows how long.'

Mary had taken up her sister's photograph.

'To think that poor Belle knows nothing of the good news!' she exclaimed.

'There's Tom, too,' said Charlie as he sprang up and passed out of the room.

'Lady Isabel!' soliloquized Ferrers. 'If I had only happened to have seen her, I would have resigned without waiting for formal proof.'

'I am glad you saw only poor insignificant, drab me,' replied Mary; 'otherwise you might have ridden away and been lost to me.'

'That could never have been,' he replied. 'I believe you crept into my heart that foggy morning when I saw you for the first time. It was a happy chance that brought me to the Alabama.'

With thoughtful tact Charlie preferred to tell the amazing story to Tom out of doors; and it may be confessed that Mary and Ferrers were quite oblivious of the long time the recital occupied.

It was midnight before Kenyon was ready to take his departure. By that time they had settled upon the course they would adopt the next day. First there would be the fuller information from Mr. Forster to consider. That, however, would but be

in satisfaction of their curiosity ; it could do nothing to alter the one main fact of their new situation.

'Then,' said Ferrers to Mary, 'I will drive you over to Belton Priory.' He noted her look of inquiry. 'Chesney's place,' he explained. 'Nora will have a welcome for her new cousin—and the more than that she is to be.'

Mary at once protested that it was out of the question. Her deprecating glance at her simple white gown showed the source of her objection.

'Vanity ! Vanity ! ' exclaimed Kenyon. 'I prefer you to go just as you are. There are no frills on Nora ; she'll want you for what you are.'

Upon reflection Mary consented. She now had no fear of her lover's relatives—her relatives. When the good news came, her overpowering thought had not been concerned with money, but the one glorious fact that she was Kenyon's equal—his fitting mate by right of birth, although strange circumstance had long withheld some portion of her birthright.

Kenyon rose and put on his cap.

'I say, Charlie,' he queried, 'you'll lend me the "Scarlet Runner" for to-night, won't you ? '

And in a happy cluster all four of them went out to the car, upon which the glorious moon high up in the blue vault now looked down to rob the great lamps of some of their brilliance.

Surly the odds were no longer against Mary Farleigh, but all in her favour.

CHAPTER XXXI

TWO LANCASHIRE WITCHES

THE next morning at half-past eight Charlie and his brother went off to the mill as usual; under the new régime their duties did not commence until nine. Tom had laughingly intimated that he was considering whether he would not 'come out on strike'; but his elders pointed out that there would be no change until many details had been discussed, and their future plans definitely decided.

No sooner had they gone than Mary settled down to the consideration of her simple wardrobe. For Kenyon's sake she was eager to make a good impression upon his sister. When she came to examine her white dress she found that it was practically unsoiled; it had been creased here and there in her games with the scholars—a happy flush suffused her cheeks at the thought that possibly Kenyon had contributed more still to the rumpling. A hot iron, however would mend matters in that direction.

She concluded that a new spray of flowers in her hat, new gloves and shoes would be as much improvement in her appearance as she could effect in the

short time at her disposal. She wished now that she had stipulated for at least a day's delay; but as Ferrers doubtless by this time was completing his arrangements, she at once set out on her walk into Spindleton to make her necessary purchases.

It was nearly twelve o'clock, when with her parcels in her hand, she took a cab from the rank in the Market Square—her first simple recognition and practical concession to her altered circumstances. She was well out on the Chester Road when she heard and saw the red car whiz past her. Charlie was driving, but he did not perceive her. She looked after the car with widening eyes; it was simply heaped up with big cardboard boxes. When her vehicle drew up at the cottage, her brother had conveyed them to the creeper-covered porch.

'All for you,' said he, when she had hastened up the path to his side. In answer to the inquiry in her eyes he added: 'Just a little present from the Honourable Charles Mannering.' His voice was laughing but there was moisture in his eyes. 'I think I failed to realize my good fortune until it enabled me to give "Mother Mary" some of the good things she ought always to have had.'

The girl was suddenly a little bit unstrung. When she tried to open the door her tremulous fingers had a difficulty in fitting the key into the lock. They entered the room, and Mary sat down in a chair with her own little parcels in her lap.

'When I got to the office,' said Charlie, 'Ferrers was awaiting me. Forster's letter had come. There's no doubt about the good news. Only yesterday afternoon were found the papers which mother had entrusted to the London solicitor years ago. They supplied just the one or two missing links. By Jove!' he concluded, 'it's like a fairy story.'

He stepped to the door and commenced to carry into the room the cardboard boxes.

'Since then,' he commenced again, 'Ferrers and I have been to Manchester. We moved, I can tell you,' he laughed. 'We ought to have the licence endorsed six times over. We went to several of the big shops and got everything for you that we could think of. There's a selection of each for you to choose from. I knew your size in gloves and shoes, so they will be all right. I didn't know your size in hats'—and he cast her a quizzing look—'even Ferrers wasn't sure of your waist. He said he believed it was seventeen. I thought he was thinking about collars.'

'We have no sizes in hats,' she protested with smiles and tears; 'and what has my waist got to do with anything?'

'We'll open these boxes and you'll see,' he replied, as he commenced to apply his knife to the strings.

Mary gave a cry of delight as he threw off the lids.

They appeared to contain everything that a girl could desire.

'I hope we've forgotten nothing,' said Charlie. 'We did our best. We asked them to throw in everything they could think of.'

'You are a couple of dears,' replied Mary, as she flung her arms around him. Her last fear concerning her visit to Lady Chesney vanished.

'You'll be ready for Ferrers at two o'clock?' asked Charlie, as he was about to return to the mill.

'Yes,' replied Mary; 'if I can decide by that time what I will wear.' Even now she had scarcely got over her surprise.

A few moments later Charlie sounded the horn to intimate that he was setting out. His sister went to the door to wave a farewell.

'Ta-ta, Lady Mary!' he cried, as he winked at a robin that had just perched upon the gate.

She went back into the house with slow step. She was very thoughtful. Hundreds of times she had repeated it to herself; already she had written it on a sheet of paper again and again; but on the lip of another it yet sounded strange and unreal.

Presently she was inspecting the feminine treasures which lay around her. How she wished Belle were there; her dear little sister was out of it all. Charlie had suggested writing, or even telegraphing, but Mary had decided to visit Westland-on-Sea on the morrow and convey the good news in person.

Had she possessed the gift of second sight, at that very moment she would have seen the scholarship girl resolutely deciding to make the best of her cream serge for the Lifeboat Bazaar in the afternoon. For the time being, Belle was not to know that a new frock had suddenly become a very small item in the new world of which, all unsuspecting, she was upon the threshold.

When at two o'clock the car came humming along the Chester Road, Kenyon Ferrers was accompanied by Charlie and Tom. They did not say so, but their sister knew that they had not been able to resist the desire to witness her in her gala attire.

Ferrers could barely believe his own eyes. He could scarcely realize that this radiant young beauty at the door was the girl in the red tam-o'-shanter, whom he had first seen, when, with flashing eyes and scornful lips, she confronted John Bilter in the mill entrance. His mental picture of her upon that morning would perhaps never be wholly effaced, but if it were, the present vision would prove a very satisfactory substitute.

Manlike, he had laughed at Mary, when she bewailed the shortcomings of her wardrobe. He had boldly asserted that calico or silk could make no difference to his sweetheart, but already he was revising that opinion, not for himself, perhaps, as for the impression she would create in the circle into which he would suddenly thrust her this afternoon.

Mary was quick to note the look of glad surprise that shot into her lover's eyes. Charlie was mute; but Tom's whistle of astonishment broke the silence and brought a laugh to the lips of each.

Mary had chosen a dress, pearl-grey in colour with pretty scroll trimming; and over this was a dust cloak to match. The hat, simple in character, was nearly hidden by a motor veil thrown back for the moment and helping to frame the delicate rose pink of her cheeks, soft as the petals of a flower.

Only Ferrers had accompanied her into the cottage. He took her into his arms and kissed her first on one cheek and then on the other. He held her out at arm's length, his eyes devouring her the while.

'Are you satisfied, sir?' she asked, with a mock curtsey, in which after all there was no mockery.

'You are perfect!' he cried with loverlike ecstasy. 'Stay a moment; there is one thing missing. He was feeling in his waistcoat pocket. 'Take off your glove and let me complete the picture.'

She obeyed, but not without a tremor and a deeper flush in her cheeks. He took the little hand—it had already lost the roughness that attendance on the Alabama frames had imposed. He raised it to his lips and then he slipped upon her finger a flashing circlet, the badge of her sweet servitude. For just a moment, cheek to cheek, the lovers stood in blissful silence. Mary's heart was very full, and Ferrers himself was not a little moved

'Are you going back to the mill?' Mary inquired of her brothers just as Ferrers was stepping up into the car.

'No,' said Charlie; 'the Alabama can do without us for this afternoon.'

'What are you going to do?' she asked. She was looking at Tom, who, with boyish ease, had taken to his new position like a duck to water.

'Anything but work,' was the reply. 'Wag and I don't feel well. We're suffering from shock. Oh!' he cried. 'I feel—feel, as if——'

'As if——' repeated Mary fondly.

'I can't quite describe it,' the boy said, 'but I could even shake hands with Jimmy Bilter.'

That was it. Boyishly and simply expressed, it hit off the emotions of each to a nicety. A glad content in which was no room for a harsh or unkind thought towards anybody in all the world!

There were frantic adieus, and the car shot forward. From end to end of the county, nay, nowhere between John o' Groats and Land's End was there a happier girl than Mary; nor a more gentle and winsome, as Ferrers could testify.

There is no space to tell of that drive of nearly fifty miles into Cheshire. Mary was in an enchanted land; the tall trees appeared to bend their tops in meek obeisance; the birds flung out their most florid notes in honour of her new dignity.

The sun was westering across the fertile Cheshire

plain when the car swung through some widely-opened massive gates into a long avenue of beeches. As they scudded along between the trees they caught glimpses of vast sheets of vivid green; in deep glades there was the gleam of sequestered pools. At the end of the avenue they burst into a gently swelling park, where the startled deer lifted their heads at the approach of the red car. To the girl it appeared a gilded chariot whirling along a flower-strewn road from which arose roseate perfumed vapours.

When they had passed round a wooded knoll there came into view Belton Priory. It was a stately, ivyclad, turreted pile with terraced gardens sloping down to a sedge-lined lake.

Only then did it dawn upon Mary that the Priory was one of the stately homes of England. She was overtaken by a sudden fit of shyness. She was about to express her fears to Ferrers, when he jammed on the brakes, bringing the car to a sudden standstill. A man, clad in a tweed knickerbocker suit, with a gun on his shoulder, was clambering over a fence.

'Chesney!' whispered Kenyon, as they were hailed in a big, mellow voice.

Mary concluded that he, at any rate, did not look very formidable. Cap in hand, he was already at the side of the car. He was the very personification of good-natured placidity; it seemed very unlikely that anything could possibly disturb his easy-going manner.

'Lord Chesney, Lady Mary Mannering,' said Ferrers.

The introduction, purposely made without the slightest preparation, was like a shot from a gun.

The gentleman dropped his cap; his gun nearly followed suit.

'Eh? What? God bless my life!' He pulled himself together with a jerk. 'I am very pleased to meet you,' he said, as he took Mary's hand. He didn't loose it. He was looking at her in a manner that would have caused her some confusion but that she recognized he was quite unaware of his prolonged scrutiny. He turned to Ferrers, whose face wore a smile of well-satisfied amusement at his brother-in-law's astonishment. It was Mary's resemblance to his wife that had shaken him out of his self-possession.

There were a hundred questions in the look he cast at Ferrers.

'We'll tell you and Nora all about it up at the house,' said Ferrers. 'Jump in.'

'Nora is away,' his lordship replied. 'She'll not return until seven. But I am not going to wait until then. I'll not budge an inch until you tell me something to go on with.'

It did not take long to give him a bare outline of the discovery of the Mannerings. And as the car proceeded more slowly up to the Priory, Chesney stood up in the back with his head between Kenyon

and Mary's, while he sought still further elucidation.

'Welcome to Belton, Lady Mary,' said Lord Chesney a couple of minutes later, when he assisted her from the car.

Mary tried exceedingly hard not to exhibit any undue surprise, but when she entered the great hall, redolent of all its ancient baronial associations, she was very nearly swept out of her self-possession. But she bore herself on the whole with an easy grace that was intensely pleasing to her lover.

After tea had been served in a room beautifully furnished, and filled with objects of art, from which Mary could scarcely take her eyes, her host got Ferrers away to himself for a few minutes. He was longing to hear what his brother-in-law intended to do now that his wealth had suddenly taken wings to itself.

He was as pleased as he was astonished to learn that the newfound Lady Mary was already pledged to Kenyon. He wondered when he was going to get to the last of these surprises. There was awaiting him at least one other.

'I congratulate you, Ken,' he said warmly. 'It's been a trifle rapid, hasn't it? Still, that doesn't matter. I am glad you have dropped that nonsense about the peerless mill-girl. The womenfolk have been in a rare stew about it. They wanted Fallowfield and me to come over to Spindleton and have you put in a strait-waistcoat; and give the girl—

"Lancashire witch" I think you called her in your letter to Nora—a fifty-pound note, and a passage ticket for New Zealand, or somewhere further off, if it could be found. They will be overjoyed at your return to sanity,' he concluded.

Ferrers endeavoured to look solemn, but he could not repress the twitching of his lips.

'They'll have to welcome the mill-girl,' said he. 'She is still peerless, still a witch.'

'But, my dear chap——' protested the elder man. The tone was the one he would have used in expostulating with an obstreperous lunatic.

'It's all right, old man,' Kenyon assured him. 'Mary Farleigh, the mill-girl, and Lady Mary Mannering are one and the same. I have known it less than twenty-four hours. Except for a wire I sent Fallowfield a few hours ago, you are the first to be told the news. Come, let us rejoin Mary.'

'Mrs. Barrett had better show you to your room,' said Lord Chesney to Mary half an hour later. 'There is no need to wait for Nora's return.'

But Mary protested that he was not to send for the housekeeper. She would have to return home. Her brothers would be concerned at her absence. She had to go to Westland-on-Sea in the morning on a visit to her sister.

'You will not go home to-night, my dear Lady Mary,' he said. 'You don't suppose Nora will allow you to take flight almost the moment she arrives.

You don't know Nora. I do,' he added with mock gravity. 'Besides,' he said, 'she is even now returning from Westland-on-Sea, and it will be the easiest thing in the world to drive you there to-morrow.'

A quarter of an hour later Mary knew that no journey would be necessary. Lady Chesney arrived, and, wonder of it all, Belle accompanied her.

Kenyon's sister stood still for just a moment when Mary rose to be introduced to her. The telegram to Lord Fallowfield, coupled with what she had learnt from Belle, and her own woman's instinct, gave her all the clues which she required.

Taking Mary into her arms, she exclaimed: 'I have brought one Lancashire witch with me, and now I have both of them.'

CHAPTER XXXII

LADY MARY—'AAR MARY'

MARY'S surprise when she found Belle in the company of Lady Chesney can readily be imagined; but it was mild compared to her emotions when she learnt the manner in which they had become acquainted. With glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes she listened to how her brave little sister had proved to be the saviour of the greatest treasure Belton Priory possessed. Lord Chesney had been drawn to Mary the moment he saw her; but Belle he took in his great strong arms and into his heart at the same time. He would have welcomed her in any case simply because she was his wife's winsome kinswoman, but for saving the life of his little son he could not find sufficient words to express his gratitude.

Upon second thoughts, Mary concluded that the boys would be able to exist for a night without her; and, indeed, Lady Chesney was emphatically of the same opinion.

Kenyon's sister had a thousand questions to ask, and everything she learnt of her new relatives did but gain from her the most ungrudging admiration and respect. It was wonderful how the inborn

qualities of race and blood had caused the orphans to rise superior to the depressing, sordid environment in which they had been confined, thanks chiefly to the indomitable courage of 'Mother Mary.'

The manner of the discovery of Gerald Mannering's family was remarkable enough in itself, but it was romance upon romance that in the newly found heiress Kenyon should have found the love of his life. She was doubly his 'treasure-trove,' as he half laughingly, half seriously, called her.

After the two sisters had retired for the night, Lord and Lady Chesney and Ferrers sat up, still discussing the resuscitation of the Mannering branch of the family.

'I go hot with shame,' said Lady Chesney, 'when I think of the dreadful things I have said about Mary. If she were to know, I don't think I could ever look her in the face again.'

'Oh yes, you could,' averred Kenyon. 'There isn't a spark of malice in her whole composition.'

'But now really, Ken, what are the boys like?' asked his sister, almost anxiously.

'Just what you might expect two chaps to be who worship Mary,' replied he.

'Yes, but what about their education?' she urged.

'Charlie is educated far better than many of his forbears,' said he. 'Chiefly commercial subjects, chemistry so far as it bears on the cotton trade, and drawing as applied to cotton machinery. Tom is

working steadily on the same lines. You've no idea what educational facilities are within the reach of the working classes, thanks to municipal evening schools.'

Lord Chesney nodded his agreement. Said he—

'If a worker, after a grinding day in the mill or a factory of any kind, attends classes at night, you can be sure he absorbs the lessons as a sponge does water. He isn't there to kill time; he's there to work.'

Perhaps his wife did not appear convinced.

'In any case,' he added, 'a voyage round the world in charge of a good tutor will work wonders. I've no fear on that score.'

The next day Charlie and Tom appeared at Belton Priory in response to an urgent message. Naturally they were shy; but that was the worst that could be urged against them. Charlie, in particular, had gained immensely by almost three months' close acquaintanceship with Kenyon, who was loudly bewailing the loss of his very capable chauffeur.

In the afternoon the Earl of Fallowfield and the Countess, with a sprinkling of other relatives, drove over to the Priory, to make a family gathering as strange as it was happy. If Gerald's children had been gawky and uncouth, the Earl would have welcomed them, if only for the sake of the brother whose disappearance had been the one grief of his life; but as it was, he had no hesitation in affirming that they were very welcome additions to the family.

. . . . .

It was midday on Friday—only three days from August Bank Holiday. The Alabama engineer pulled a string; a hoarse whistle rang out the signal to 'knock off'; the machinery ceased its racket, to remain still and silent until six o'clock on Wednesday morning. To-morrow was Mary Farleigh's wedding day, and the Alabama folks were in a mighty ferment over it. It was useless to remind them that she was Lady Mary Mannering; they were perfectly aware of the fact; but they always had called her Mary Farleigh, and as Mary Farleigh they would speak of her down the vista of the long years to come.

Into the yard clattered the hundreds of operatives, men, women, and children, all ages, all sizes; but all firmly resolved to get as near as possible to the little platform erected just outside the offices. Five minutes later, that was where Mary and Kenyon were standing to receive a wedding present, towards which every hand had cheerfully subscribed.

There is no need to tell of Mary's radiant face, and how the happy tears would come into her eyes; it is unnecessary to repeat the words in which Ferrers thanked them for the silver epergne, that would always hold an honoured place in their grand new home, which was only so far away as to escape the murk from Spindleton's hundred smoking stacks.

And then the cheers! The old engineer screamed out a solo on the steam syren, and the astonishing variation in notes that he managed to contrive

caused the operatives in other mills to surmise that the Alabama boilers had suddenly gone mad.

The wedding took place on the morrow at St. George's, Hanover Square. There were six bridesmaids; and if Belle was the prettiest, the Honourable Hilda Jordan was one of the happiest. She openly confessed that she was delighted with Ken's choice, as she rather wondered to herself that she ever gave her cousin a second thought while there was upon earth such a prize as Dudley Forster, who to-day was acting as Kenyon's best man.

It is a far cry from Spindleton to London, but in the crowd outside the church—and inside it, too, for that matter—were not a few becapped and neckerchiefed men and rather roughly garbed women. None of those who witnessed the ceremony, or who cheered as the happy couple drove away, brought down more fervent benisons upon their heads than did they, who had spent weary hours, and not a little 'hard-addled brass,' just to travel to London and say, 'God bless aar Mary!'

. . . . .

Six months later. It was a great day at the Alabama. The mill was scarcely recognizable. A new Union Jack waved in the breeze high up on the tall flagstaff, the gateway was wreathed with evergreens, and from the countless windows hung streamers and banners and gay bunting of every imaginable kind. The yard was packed with the

operatives dressed in their Sunday best, their faces beaming with happy smiles as quips and cranks were bandied from lip to lip. Everybody was expectant —any minute might arrive the Honourable Kenyon Ferrers and Lady Mary after their protracted honeymoon, spent chiefly amid the Italian lakes.

When at length a new car swung in at the big gates, the mill-hands gave vent to a roar of welcome that could be heard distinctly in the Market Square. Of all the hundreds who shouted and cheered there was perhaps only one disappointed man—the old engineer, who regretfully concluded it was a mistake not to have banked up the boiler fires the previous evening. For voicing a welcome nothing could equal a good steam syren when the pressure gauge showed 150 lbs. to the inch.

Lady Mary's heart was very full, as with moistening eyes she gazed upon the crowd of which she was once an insignificant unit. Silently she reaffirmed her own and her husband's resolve to brighten the lives of those who looked to them for bread. They intended to do more than provide for the material needs of those whose willing hands brought wealth to the owners of the Alabama: they would improve their happiness, double their joys, and divide their griefs as far as was humanly possible.

To-day was to see the first example of that true philanthropy that buries not gold in ostentatious charity, but builds its shrine in the human heart.

With a silver key Lady Mary unlocked the door and declared open the new building that had sprung up at the far end of the mill yard. This was the Alabama Working Men's Institute, replete with every convenience that working people could desire. There were great mess-rooms in which could be taken meals in comfort away from the dust-laden atmosphere of the mill; there were reading-rooms and a gymnasium and baths.

The gratified spinners and weavers walked through the building, finally taking their seats in the hall for the 'sing-song' dear to Lancashire folk. The performers were all Alabama hands, and if there were sometimes shortcomings in time and tune, there was no lack in the generous applause elicited by each item. But it fell to foreman Clem Smith's lot to fetch the house down. He came on to the platform to sing his song, and the operatives smiled in anticipatory pleasure, for his repertoire covered a wide range of popular comic songs. But for this occasion Clem was forsaking the humorous business. There was a solemn hush as the accompanist played the opening bars of 'Mary.'

Clem's voice, with his rich Lancashire burr, sounded infinitely better in song than in his ordinary dialectical prose. It was the depth of feeling in every word that caused the operatives to look anxiously at the platform to note the effect of his daring.

Lady Mary's eyes were downcast, but the rich

colour that suffused her cheeks betokened her recognition of the personal element in the selection.

One glance at Kenyon Ferrers told the audience that Clem Smith was not guilty of presumption; he was but giving voice to sentiments concerning his beloved wife which he himself was proving in every hour of his happy married life.

Consequently at the end of the first verse Clem found himself assisted in the chorus by a powerful choir of hundreds of voices —

> Kind, kind and gentle is she;
> Kind is my Mary.
> The tender blossom on the tree
> Cannot compare with Mary.

Filled even now with the romance of it all, the voices throbbed with feeling. Every note was a tribute of praise for the gentle, modest girl so wonderfully and suddenly called to high station, and a prayer for happiness ever to mark her path through life.

'Speech!' called out a voice. The cry was taken up with avidity. 'Speech! Speech!' came from all quarters of the hall in kindly, yet insistent, demand.

Kenyon Ferrers smilingly questioned Lady Mary with his eyes. For a moment she did not recognize that the call was for her.

'I couldn't speak a word, Ken,' she whispered. 'My heart is too full. Oh! my beloved, tell them—tell them——' Her voice broke.

He nodded his head in understanding, as he rose to his feet. There was instant silence as he viewed the closely packed faces for a moment. He was deeply moved; his hands trembled a little.

'Lady Mary,' he said, 'has asked me to speak for her. She wishes to say that this is one of the happiest days she can possibly have in her whole life. When the hand of affliction was laid heavily upon her she well proved your sympathetic hearts, and as long as life lasts, come weal, come woe, you will ever have a warm corner in her affections. I shall never forget that I found my dear wife in the mill gates at six o'clock one winter's morning. The Alabama brought me great happiness, and God willing, I will devote my best years to the repayment of the debt I owe it.'

There was a vibrant note in the young master's voice that showed he meant every word of it. If proof were wanted it came three years later when a great strike shook Lancashire to its foundations. Old established mills failed by the score; starvation stalked into thousands of homes; but the Alabama, almost alone, was running full time. Lady Mary, as she played with her little son in the terraced gardens of her stately home, was thankful that no shadow lay upon the lives of those who ever fondly thought of 'Aar Mary.'